ETHICS AND POLITICS IN NEW EXTREME FILMS

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By

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Abstract

This thesis investigates a corpus of controversial, mainly European films from 1998 to 2013, to determine which features have led to their critical description as 'new extreme' films and according to what ethical framework 'new extreme' films operate. These films feature provocative depictions of sex and violence, and have been decried as misogynistic, homophobic and racist. I contend, firstly, that the extremity in 'new extreme' films is best understood as an unresolved tension between opposites such as inside/outside and convention/transgression. This definition draws on work on the 'extreme' by sociologist Patrick Baudry and art historian Paul Ardenne. Secondly, I argue that these films employ an ethical framework based on confrontational aesthetic strategies which challenge dominant interpretations of images of sex and violence, a framework similar to the image-based ethics of Kaja Silverman, Petra Kuppers and Wendy Kozol. In this way, 'new extreme' films destabilise interpretations of images of women, pornography, nationhood, sex, violence, race and sexuality.

This thesis contends that a definition of extremity based on unresolved tensions elucidates the specificity of 'new extreme' films whose opposites manifest themselves on formal, aesthetic, narrative, generic and political levels. I argue that these opposites can be linked to an image-based ethical framework, both of which are best understood by examining what is visible or obscured, how close to or distanced from the images we feel and for how long we endure the images. Exploring visibility and obscurity (Krzywinska, White), haptics and sensation (Beugnet, Marks), and 'processive' duration (Keeling), I contend that particular strategies of visibility, proximity and duration provoke visceral reactions of disgust, arousal, nausea and shock. Using shocking visibility and undecipherable obscurity, haptic close-ups and distanced long shots, rapid editing and extended takes, new extreme films undermine stable viewing positions thereby challenging our interpretations of images of sex and violence.

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Author's note

A number of the French- and German-language works consulted in the course of this project are not currently available in English translation. For these works, the translations are my own. For those works available in English translation, the bibliographical reference refers to the translation.

All films are referred to by their English title except for *Baise-moi* which is commonly referred to in English by its original title. At the first mention of a film, the original title is provided in square brackets if it is not in English.

And so much more are the wonders in extreames.

– William Shakespeare

Introduction

Early in my final year as an undergraduate, I encountered films such as *Romance* (Breillat, 1999), *Irreversible [Irréversible]* (Noé, 2002), *Twentynine Palms* (Dumont, 2003) and *Antichrist* (von Trier, 2009). I left the darkened room where I had watched *Irreversible* with my head spinning, my insides crushed and a profound desire to escape my envelopment in the sensuous world of horrific violence and doomed eroticism. A short time later, I found myself crying out in distress at the final stages of *Antichrist*, feeling myself physically assaulted by the images in ways I had never experienced before. I felt helpless and rattled, confused and violated, and continued to think about these films for days afterwards. Viewing *Romance* was a similarly challenging experience. The film's powerful polemic overwhelmed me but provoked numerous thoughts about the depiction of women and sex that remained with me long after the closing credits. I began to look at images of sex and violence differently, seeing the mechanisms of pleasure, tolerance and distance that are built into so many depictions of sexual and violent acts. The films mentioned above triggered a series of thoughts about images of women, sex, sexuality, violence, sexual violence, parenthood, revenge and trauma.

I began to explore these films further, but several questions remained to which I found few satisfying answers in the existing literature: 'what is achieved in making or watching such challenging films?', 'what is it about these films that makes my mind return repeatedly to their images afterwards?' and 'why have these films been grouped together under the monikers of 'new' and 'extreme'?' This led me to explore other potentially similar images of sex and violence in order to ascertain how the experience of watching these films is different from that involved in watching other cinematic depictions of violent or sexual acts. What thematic, aesthetic or affective strategies are necessary to make me look at images, and the worlds they depict, differently? This exploration brought me into contact with films far beyond the French centre of gravity which the critical literature initially focussed on. Considering many such films together, it became clear that the link was firstly one of ethical reflection; and secondly about *how* limits are transgressed and thus encourage the viewer to engage in this ethical reflection.

This thesis is both about the films often dubbed 'new extreme' and the concept of extremity. I argue that new extreme films (a term I interrogate in a moment) can be grouped together according to two principal criteria. Firstly, new extreme films are best understood as mobilising unresolved tensions between two sides of a boundary; sides which I refer to as *extremus* (just inside a boundary) and *exter* (just outside the boundary). This particular engagement with boundaries I call 'extreme' after art historian Paul Ardenne. These films push up against and transgress moral, legal, aesthetic, generic, critical and experiential boundaries but only a bit and only in small amounts. They do not constitute an attempt to be as transgressive as possible; rather, the challenging viewing experience of the films lies in the overlayering of many small transgressions. Simultaneously, anchoring *points de repère* such as narrative and generic con-

ventions or easy character identification are destabilised, making it more difficult for the spectator to stabilise themselves against the challenging imagery by using existing narrative and generic frameworks to construct a clear and legible interpretative lens.

Secondly, I contend that new extreme films deploy an ethical framework based on confrontational strategies that challenge dominant interpretations of sex and violence. The films destabilise interpretations (of images) of women, pornography, nationhood, sex, violence, race and sexuality. This ethical framework echoes suggestions put forward by Kaja Silverman (1996), Petra Kuppers (2007) and Wendy Kozol (2014) for a progressive visual ethics. Certain images of violence are a means both of providing an alternative to common trends in the depiction of violence (i.e. they contribute to the totality of images of violence) and a means of encouraging the spectator to reflect on how violence is depicted in images. As Silverman suggests, visual texts "have the power to re-educate the look," (1996: 5), to train us in new ways of interpreting what we see. Where we might before have looked nonchalantly upon yet another image of brutal murder, after watching a film that realises Silverman's ideas, we might look at the same image with greater concern for the victim, greater concern about how we enjoy violence, greater concern about the gender stereotypes often affirmed in moments of violence. The image of murder remains the same but perhaps we see different meanings in it than we did before. New extreme films attempt this 're-education of the look' by challenging, shocking, upsetting, arousing, disgusting and disturbing the spectator in order to destabilise the meanings conventionally attached to an image and to promote alternative interpretations.

This thesis therefore provides original contributions to the field of film studies in four crucial ways. Firstly, I identify a series of unresolved tensions between the inside and outside of a boundary as being definitive of a corpus of films often dubbed as 'new extreme'. Secondly, I

introduce the concept of the 'extreme' – considered in terms of *extremus* and *exter* – after Ardenne, as a structuring theory relating to limits, boundaries, the internal and external. It is in this respect that this thesis holds a relevance and import beyond the limits of the films that I analyse in detail here. Against generalising ideas about transgression and its meaning, we must look in detail at *how* limits are crossed or pushed up against, rather than just *whether* they are crossed, an idea which is not only relevant to thinking about legal or moral transgressions but about the crossing of generic and aesthetic boundaries as well. Thirdly, I provide a schema for conceptually grouping a nebulous collection of films and for distinguishing them from other films which critics and scholars link to the films analysed here. Fourthly, I propose that there is a common ethical framework across this grouping of films based on the film-viewing experience, which can be understood as encouraging the viewer to see alternatives to dominant modes of interpretation of images and the acts images depict. I argue that, despite criticisms of these films as amoral, nihilistic or apolitical, they engage the spectator deeply in ethical and political reflection.

Critical approaches to new extreme films

Much has been written about some of the films I analyse in this thesis. The first documented collecting of this group of films which we can loosely describe as containing graphic violence and explicit sex, was an article by James Quandt dubbing them the 'New French Extremity'. Quandt described the films mainly in terms of their content – their "rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm" (2011a: 18) – and compared them unfavourably to the "the authentic, liberating outrage" of *Weekend* (Godard, 1967) and *Salò* (Pasolini, 1975). For Quandt, not only is there little value in these films but they are broadly undifferentiatable. He lists rape, cannibalism, BDSM practices, ejaculation and murder together: "gang rapes, bashings and slashings and blindings,

hard-ons and vulvas, cannibalism, sadomasochism and incest, fucking and fisting, sluices of cum and gore" (ibid.). Quandt brings together anything arty and French which references horror or pornography, swinging from psychological horror in *Switchblade romance [Haute tension]* (Aja, 2003) to the Bressonian *The Life of Jesus [La Vie de Jésus]* (Dumont, 1997) to musings on cruising culture in *Porn Theatre [La chatte à deux têtes]* (Nolot, 2002) to the softcore erotica of *Secret Things [Choses secrètes]* (Brisseau, 2002) via his favourite punching-bags of *Twentynine Palms*, *Baise-moi* (Despentes and Trinh-Thi, 2000) and *Irreversible*. I return to what differentiates these films in a moment, but for now it is important to note the broad-brush emphasis on content and national context that characterises Quandt's influential opening gambits. This influence can still be seen in the Wikipedia page for the 'New French Extremity' at the time of printing,[1] with Quandt prominently displayed at the top, and sub-headings about New French Horror, exploitation cinema and closer analyses of horror films *Frontier(s) [Frontière(s)]* (Gens, 2007) and *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008). A later article by Quandt (2011b) qualifies some of these general remarks but, as the first article to coin a phrase linking 'new' and 'extremity', Quandt's original article occupies a privileged position in subsequent literature on these films.

Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (2011) provide one of the first and most useful correctives to this dismissal, first by focusing on the themes and viewing experiences common to the films. Secondly, they both expand the term 'new extreme' beyond Quandt's French delimitation to include Swedish, Danish and Austrian films, and narrow the term by implicitly separating the horror, softcore-pornography and cruising films mentioned above from those to which their collection devotes its analysis. Aware of the imprecision and varied usage of the term 'new extreme', Horeck and Kendall note that the films they consider have been treated under various

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_French_Extremity [accessed 16.11.2017]

different headings including ‘cinema of sensation’ (Beugnet 2007), ‘*cinéma du corps*’ (Palmer 2011), ‘*cinéma brut*’ (Russell 2010) and ‘extreme realism’ (Williams 2009) to which I can add ‘extreme art film’ (Hobbs 2015), the ‘feel-bad film’ (Lübecker 2015) and films of ‘the unwatchable’ (Grønstad 2012). Even the use of ‘extremity’ over ‘extremism’ is not agreed upon: Quandt chooses ‘extremity’ while Horeck and Kendall opt for ‘extremism’. Nonetheless, Horeck and Kendall offer some suggestions of what links the films their collection explores, which they summarise in four key aspects: self-reflexivity, a complex and often contradictory nature, provocation as a mode of address, and the destruction of the passive spectator (2011: 1–2). This conceptual understanding of extremity is one that I will build on in this thesis.

Mattias Frey proposes a more fleshed-out definition of extremity in his mongraph on ‘extreme cinema’, which brings an industrial perspective into his understanding of the term. Criticising accounts that focus on representation, Frey attempts to move the debate towards industrial systems, regulatory systems and reception when defining extreme cinema, considering what surrounds the film artefact as instrumental to a film being labelled as extreme. He thus suggests a two-tier ‘cluster’ definition: first, all extreme films must “explicitly depict and/or primarily thematise sex, violence or sexual violence” (2016: 7). Additionally they must fulfil at least one, but as many as possible, of eight secondary criteria: they must deploy an art-film style; create controversy; play at ‘extreme’ or ‘artsploitation’ festivals; be exhibited in arthouse cinemas; be distributed/marketed as art or artsploitation films; be positioned by the filmmakers as intentionally artistic; be discussed by fans as artistic; be awarded the highest classification rating, be banned or left unclassified (ibid.: 8). Frey notes that most of these secondary criteria are not aesthetic but rather relate to “institutional, business, functional, artistic, critical, regulatory, and popular discourses” (ibid.). This definition develops Horeck’s and Kendall’s by acknowledging

the centrality of images of sex and violence to these films whilst also allowing ostensibly different films to be brought under the umbrella of the 'extreme'. It builds on a Derridean understanding of genre as participatory (1980) which is helpfully inclusive and accepts how films exist on a spectrum, with each film participating in a genre not necessarily fulfilling the same criteria as other participants in that genre (Frey 2016: 7). This schema allows Frey to draw useful links between modern iterations of extreme cinema(s) from the late 1990s to the present day, and older films from the 1970s mentioned by Quandt, Hobbs and others, because his participatory criteria are sufficiently broad and context-dependent that changing cultural sensitivities are taken into account.

Other recent books on extreme cinema are less specific about what constitutes the extremity of their corpus. While Elena del Río proposes a 'vital ethology of extreme cinemas', it is unclear what is meant by the plural ('cinemas' versus Frey's extreme 'cinema'). She presents her corpus as grounding "the controversial, shocking effects of their work less in sensationalist physicality and more on a sustained practice of intensity that already pervades the everyday body" and as including films in which "the sensory-motor schema is disabled and cannot remedy the situation" (2016: 4, 25). Also investigating the broad grouping of 'extreme cinema', Aaron Kerner and Jonathan Knapp present the case for considering extreme cinema through the lens of body genres, specifically around sex, horror, melodrama and humour as genres which engage the body: arousal, fear, crying and laughing respectively. They suggest that 'extreme cinema' treats "graphic content – sex and/or violence – in a highly stylized manner that 'speaks' (to) the 'language of the body'" (2016: 15). However, with such a wide array of genres and such a broad description of their target films – their corpus is far larger even than Frey's, with close analyses of the TV show *Family Guy* (1999-) and Oscar-nominated *127 Hours* (Boyle, 2010) also appearing in their book – the links between the different films/TV series examined

become tenuous. Like in del Río's book, the term 'extreme' is not investigated in itself, rather they examine 'extreme cinema': films already understood (for reasons that are not always clear) as 'extreme'. This thesis contributes a focussed exploration of the term 'extremity' to debates around 'extreme cinema'.

Other broader comments about new extremity bring in ideas that resurface within this thesis. Kendall notes that we can "define the new extremism as a distinctive experience of spectatorship that negotiates between the intellectual and the visceral" (2011: 44). This foreshadows my argument that the ethical experience of new extreme films and links made between the visceral and intellectual are a factor in defining them. Another broad comment is made by Victoria Best and Martin Crowley who argue that a distinctive feature of new extreme films is the awkward relationship they create with genre norms and literary or intellectual culture (2007: 6). I examine this in relation to new extreme films pushing up against and transgressing genre boundaries, and the partial dismantlement of generic and narrative structures. Martine Beugnet also considers new extreme films as a broad grouping, arguing that "one of the distinctive features of the new extremism is the specific concern with the debunking of some feminine stereotyping, a concern in evidence in the work of certain female filmmakers" (2011: 33). This is not a facet of all new extreme films but is the case for *Romance*, *Fat Girl [A ma soeur!]* (Breillat, 2001), *In My Skin [Dans ma peau]* (de Van, 2002), *Baise-moi* and *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001) as well as other films in the primary corpus of this thesis.

One especially common way to link new extreme films is to evoke their use of 'low'-cultural aesthetic tropes from horror and pornography. I avoid this terminology however for two reasons: firstly, as several commentators point out (see Beugnet 2007: 34; Hobbs 2015) this trend

of including sex and violence in more mainstream films has a long history and so is not particular to new extreme films. Secondly, the usage of terms such as 'use' and 'borrow' suggests that new extreme films sit outside 'low' culture and indeed that 'low' culture even exists; a dualistic conception of 'high' and 'low' culture is inherently unproductive (Fisher 2001: 409–22) and especially for a consideration of extremity because new extreme films cannot be easily located either within 'high'- or 'low'-art categories. Nonetheless, I investigate this idea through an examination of the links between new extreme films and what we might call conventional horror and conventional pornography as well as hardcore horror and pornographic horror to point out how new extreme films are intertwined with, but also distinct from, other ways of depicting sex and violence. Finally, Alison Taylor provides some useful summarising comments about new extreme films in her book on violence and the everyday. She points out that the violence in new extreme films is frequently difficult to reconcile into clear narratives and the significance of the violence remains undefined (2017: 2–3). Importantly, she demands that we consider the films as a whole rather than focussing solely on the moments of violence or sex (ibid.: 4): she focuses on the everyday moments in the films and indeed I argue that only by taking into account all moments in the films can we properly understand the moments of violence or sex. We must therefore not see the shifts from graphic violence to everyday mundaneness or vice-versa as authorial missteps but rather consider how these changes and juxtapositions affect the spectatorial experience of the film as a whole.

Delimiting new extreme films

In seeking to delimit particular films as constituting a corpus of 'new extreme' films, I focus on some films not heretofore considered as new extreme and do not mention others that have been included under the rubric of new extremity. In doing so, I inevitably enter into a taxonomic debate about what is extreme or not, new or not, new extreme or not. As will become clear, this thesis is not about providing a yardstick for deciding what is in or out of a particular category but about interrogating the term 'new extreme' and the concept of 'extremity'. This involves considering why certain recent films have become linked with the term 'extreme', examining the term 'extreme' from different perspectives and then reconsidering the films and the term in light of such analyses. This thesis is therefore both filmic and philosophical in its emphasis and the conclusions are wide-ranging in terms of spectatorship, genre, transgression, ethics and politics. My aim is to provide a springboard for considering many films, whether designated by critics, scholars and viewers as extreme or not, and thus the methodology is crucial: the corpus itself is open to debate and reappraisal, not least because transgression and extremity are inescapably relative terms and thus what constitutes an extreme image changes, even within the corpus of films I explore.

This thesis explores a group of films, often defined as 'new extreme', within the broader category of 'extreme cinema' as defined by Frey, Kerner and Knapp amongst others. While corresponding to Frey's industrial, sociological definition of extreme cinema, the films which I group under the moniker of 'new extreme films' provide a viewing experience that can be distinguished from the experience of viewing other films which Frey addresses. Despite Frey's critique of representative approaches, this is, above all, a thesis on aesthetics, genre, ethics and film-viewing experiences and thus is interested in making important distinctions that may be

glossed over by distributors and publicists when promoting a film and trying to locate it within pre-existing categories, readily communicable to potential audiences. While it is useful to think about marketing, distribution, filmmaker rhetoric, funding and festival appearances, this does not negate the findings of close analysis and philosophical conceptualisation, which reveal fundamental differences between the films that Frey places together within one 'super-genre': for instance, Frey includes violent South Korean and American films within his corpus despite scholars arguing that extremity is understood differently by South-Korean and American audiences because their understandings of 'good' and 'evil' differ (Cagle 2009). Frey's is an important contribution to the field of extreme film studies and our findings should be seen as complementary rather than contradictory.

This study began with the viewing experience and ethical encounter created by several of the films considered in almost all accounts to be new extreme films: *Irreversible, Twentynine Palms, Romance, Fat Girl, Sombre* (Grandrieux, 1999), *A New Life [La Vie nouvelle]* (Grandrieux, 2002), *Antichrist, In My Skin, Trouble Every Day*. My analysis of these films locates a particular form of challenging viewing experience, a particular engagement with moral, aesthetic and genre boundaries, and an emphasis on particular ways of depicting sex, violence and sexual violence. I suggest that these can be most usefully understood in terms of extremity (an engagement with the outer inside edge and the inside outer edge of boundaries/limits) and an 'extreme' presentation of visibility, proximity and duration. This leads me to films not previously linked with extremity (*The Tribe [Плем'я]* (Slaboshpytskiy, 2014), *Free Will [Der Freie Wille]* (Glasner, 2006)), to films sometimes linked by other scholars to new extremity (*Battle in Heaven [Battalla en el cielo]* (Reygadas, 2005), *The Idiots [Idioterne]*

(von Trier, 1998), *Taxidermia* (Pálfi, 2006), *The Brown Bunny* (Gallo, 2003), *9 Songs* (Winterbottom, 2004)) and away from many films sometimes caught in the net of this inconsistently deployed term.

There are certain conspicuous absences from my corpus, which must be explained. Michael Haneke's films do not feature here; this is especially because, as many scholars have pointed out, they tend to avoid visible depictions of violence and contain little sex. Thus while they have overlapping concerns with new extreme films in terms of an ethics of spectatorship, ambiguous political viewpoints, themes relating to societal violence, a challenging viewing experience and an aggressive attitude towards their spectator, they achieve these in different ways and with different consequences from new extreme films. There are exceptions to this claim about visibility with the suicide in *Hidden [Caché]* (Haneke, 2005) and the images of pornography in *The Piano Teacher [La Pianiste]* (Haneke, 2001); my aim is therefore not to circumscribe Haneke as irrelevant to this study but to look beyond Haneke when thinking about an ethics of spectatorship in ways that other scholars may find useful in reappraising his films and existing Haneke scholarship. Finally, it is my hope to draw attention to films that have received less critical attention.

Certain other films which have similarly been linked with the films in my corpus, but I do not explore, are *Humanity [L'Humanité]* (Dumont, 1999), *The Life of Jesus*, *Red Road* (Arnold, 2006), *Kinatay* (Mendoza, 2009) and *Sex and Lucia [Lucía y el sexo]* (Medem, 2001) because their investment in narrative and relatively clear political subjects (youth unemployment, grief and justice, gang violence, parenthood and romance) distinguishes the viewing experience from that of new extreme films. Similarly, thrillers such as *Stranger by the Lake [L'Inconnu du lac]*

(Guiraudie, 2013), *Demonlover* (Assayas, 2002) and *Swimming Pool* (Ozon, 2003) do not feature here despite also containing graphic scenes of sex and violence. I also choose not to focus on the myriad films that conform to most narrative, generic and aesthetic norms apart from the inclusion of visible acts of sex: examples include *Shortbus* (Mitchell, 2006), *Q* (Bouhnik, 2011), *Sexual Chronicles of a French Family [Chroniques sexuelles d'une famille d'aujourd'hui]* (Arnold and Barr, 2012), *Leap Year [Año Bisiesto]* (Rowe, 2010), *Diet of Sex* (Brun, 2014) and *Bang Gang* (Husson, 2015) which are all essentially conventional romantic comedies or coming-of-age films with added sex. Omitting these films is no judgement on their quality or significance, it is only a judgement that they do not operate on the spectator in comparable ways to the films constituting my corpus.

Other key separations that I make from this corpus are American horror films such as *Saw* (Wan, 2004), *Hostel* (Roth, 2005), *I Spit on Your Grave* (Monroe, 2010) and *Last House on the Left* (Illiadis, 2009) and French horror films like *Martyrs*, *Inside [A l'intérieur]* (Maury and Bustillo, 2007), *Livid [Livide]* (Maury and Bustillo, 2011), *Them [Ils]* (Moreau and Palud, 2006) and *Frontier(s)*. New extreme films can be understood as horror films and often attract viewers because of their horror credentials but their participation in the horror genre is at a much less intense level than the genre films mentioned above. New extreme films operate at and beyond the limits of horror (and pornography), rather than occupying a normative position within a genre. I engage more closely with the sub-genre of hardcore horror as a result of the long graphic scenes of sexual violence featured in such films in order to show their 'maximalist' tendencies in contrast to the 'extreme' engagement with boundaries we see in new extreme films. I make a similar argument about pornographic horror which I also analyse in detail. New extreme films often operate on the boundaries of pornography but in an 'extreme' rather than a maximalist manner. Unlike some scholars, I do not attempt to delineate what is pornography

and what is not: pornography is a clear influence on new extreme films and many scenes in new extreme films can be understood as pornographic. I attempt to show both how these scenes diverge from conventional heterosexual pornography but also how they are inextricable from its ideology. These tensions between different genres (pornography, horror, etc) are precisely what I locate as being specific to the manner of operation of new extreme films.

I must also note this study's geographic boundaries. The vast majority of the films in my corpus are made in Europe by European directors. Nonetheless, I have expanded the common restriction to Western Europe with my inclusion of films from Serbia, Hungary and Ukraine as well as expanding the common focus on European cinema with films from the United States and Mexico. While I did investigate films from Japan (*Ichi the Killer [殺し屋 1]* (Miike, 2001), *Visitor Q [ビジターQ]* (Miike, 2001), *Battle Royale [バトル・ロワイアル]* (Fukasaku, 2000)), South Korea (*Oldboy [올드보이]* (Park, 2003), *The Isle [섬]* (Kim, 2000)), the Philippines (*Kinatay*, *Serbis* (Mendoza, 2008)), Brazil (*Elite Squad [Tropa de Elite]* (Padilha, 2007)) and Taiwan (*The Wayward Cloud [天邊一朵雲]* (Tsai, 2005)), the experience of viewing them, the political situations influencing the acts and the film-viewing expectations set up by these films require a full study of their own which was not compatible with the conclusions I draw here. There is no intentional geographical prejudice within this study; however, given that the centre of gravity is French, it is unsurprising that the corpus is predominantly European in nature.

Finally, this thesis does not investigate in detail, what might be termed 'old' extreme films, to which Quandt and other scholars refer. These films include *Weekend*, *Salò* and *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980), that have often been examined in terms of their politics, but their aesthetic tropes could be linked to new extreme films in terms of visibility, proximity and duration.

However, in order to focus precisely on the nature of new extremity and on providing as much evidence as possible for my claims, this thesis remains focused on recent iterations of extremity.

Boundaries, limits and extremity in other scholarship

The most important terms in this thesis – extremity, boundary/limit, visibility, proximity, duration – have arisen frequently in scholarship on this corpus of films: Jenny Chamarette refers to the limits of narrative form (2011: 71), Catherine Wheatley refers to the limits of the real (2011: 101), Emma Wilson writes of the limits of performance (2001: 154), del Río evokes the limit of the possible (2016: 5), Asbjørn Grønstad describes the limits of visualisation, art and morality (2012: 40). Wheatley's comments stem from a desire to discover exactly what boundaries and limits are being crossed in new extreme films (2011: 94) but mostly limits are mentioned by scholars in the context of other comments about the films. This demonstrates that, while there has been no concerted focus on questions of limits or boundaries, they are of significant importance when analysing new extreme films. Moreover, limits are mentioned in relation to many different elements of the films (narrative, the real, performance, etc). I demonstrate how the overlapping of small transgressions of these limits constitutes the extremity of these films. Although del Río evokes Deleuze rather than Ardenne, as I do, she also links ethics and 'extreme' subject matter by means of limits. Seeking to justify certain forms of filmic violence, she argues that "it is not a nihilistic impulse that drives cinema to experiment with affective thresholds, but, on the contrary, a desire to augment, refine, and reenergize our vital powers. […] a film can take itself to the limit of what it can do and think while remaining aware that surpassing this limit may entail [risks]" (2016: 24). Without dissecting the Deleuzian ideas underpinning this contention, we can see that an engagement with different limits is linked to

an ethical project, that of 'augmenting our vital powers'.[2] My understanding of limits brings together these different analyses, demonstrating a particular engagement with the limit that is common between, for instance, the limits of narrative form in *A New Life* (Chamarette 2011: 71) and the limits of performance in *Romance* (Wilson 2001: 154).

The 'extreme' is mentioned by several scholars and critics. Horeck and Kendall highlight the theoretical difficulties of engaging with a term that is relative, pointing out that "the definition of what one takes to constitute extreme is notoriously subjective, slippery and bound by historical and social pressures" (2011: 5). Indeed the relative and moveable nature of the boundaries that encircle the norm, and are pushed against and transgressed by new extreme films, is an important facet of my discussion of extremity in terms of *extremus* and *exter*. The subjective slipperiness of the term 'extreme' means that it has been used in numerous ways by scholars of new extreme films. As well as in relation to filmmaking (Kendall 2011: 44), film scenes or sequences (Barker and others 2007: 4) and violence (Dumont in Rouyer and Vassé 2003: 18), 'extreme' has been used to describe corporealities (Chamarette 2011: 71), pleasure (Beugnet 2007: 4), ethical indifference (Downing 2004: 276) and defamiliarisation (Best and Crowley 2007: 71). Although in the latter cases, these may be instances of more vernacular usage, where 'extreme' connotes 'going to the utmost extent', 'exceedingly great or intense' (oed.com, 'extreme' §A4), we must take the use of the word seriously when it arises in scholarship on extremity. Drawing carefully on how scholars and critics use particular terms to describe and analyse new extreme films, I propose a way of understanding new extreme films and their relation to limits and extremity that incorporates and links many of the scholarly accounts cited here. This enables greater understanding of the association between the moniker 'extreme' and particular content, acts, styles and narratives structures.

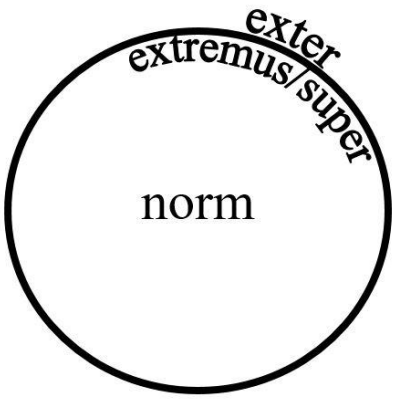
[2] 'vital' refers to life forces theorized by Nietzsche.

Extremity and new extreme films

Bruno Dumont declares that he expects "an artist to show me the edge. And to show me that edge, they must go over a bit to the other side" (in Palmer 2011: 57). This idea of being inside, looking out towards the edge, and simultaneously going beyond that edge structures my thinking about extremity. Dumont does not explain exactly what 'edge' he is referring to and nor does my understanding of the boundaries that new extreme films breach focus on any one boundary. Rather, aesthetic, moral, ethical, bodily, generic and conventional boundaries are pushed up against and transgressed. Using Dumont's terms, new extreme films go over the edge 'a bit' but do not fall completely into unknown, unacceptable or unpleasant territories. Having elements in a film which transgress and others which do not, having numerous aspects of a film which function in this looking-out/going-beyond, inside/outside, convention/transgression manner creates unresolved tensions in new extreme films. These unresolved tensions at different limits are at the heart of the extremity of new extreme films.

These tensions and contradictions can already be seen in dictionary definitions of the word 'extreme'. It means 'outermost, farthest from the centre" (oed.com, 'extreme' §A1a) and "exceeding the limits of moderation" (ibid. §A4d); that is, outermost inside area and beyond the limit defining that area. Looking at the etymology of 'extreme' we see the same two meanings: the Latin *extremus* means 'to the utmost extent' (outermost inside area) and is also the superlative of *exter*, which means 'on the outer side', 'outward' and 'external' (Lockwood and Smith 1976: 257). In dictionary terms, 'extreme' can signify both inside and outside a limit. Ardenne utilises this linguistic tension to separate 'extreme' into two constituent parts: *extremus* and *exter* (2006: 19). Elements of an artwork that push up against but do not transgress a boundary

constitute *extremus* (sometimes termed *super*). Elements which marginally transgress a boundary and occupy the space just beyond a boundary constitute *exter*.



Ardenne consequently distinguishes the 'superlative spectacle', which contains only *extremus/super*, from the 'extreme spectacle', which has elements of both *extremus* and *exter*: "the 'superlative' spectacle would be the *super* without the *exter*: the first stage of the extreme, its lower limit;" while "an 'extreme' spectacle […] [is] a spectacle which is both *super* and *exter* at once" (ibid.: 64, 95). The extreme is therefore inherently about the unresolved tensions between *extremus* and *exter*: the *exter* of an extreme image or an extreme spectacle cannot be understood as separate from the *extremus*.

This is not a recapitulation of Georges Bataille's understanding of transgression and taboo as separate mutually reinforcing concepts. However, transgression and extremity are closely related because they both describe forms of boundary-breaching and are both relative, not absolute, terms. Bataille argues that transgression "does not deny the taboo, but transcends and completes it," (1986: 63) with transgression being both integral to the functioning of society (by completing taboos) and a transcendental act for the individual. Bataille's interest in the transcendental power of transgression is evident in his focus on the extreme limit of being where the effect is of breaking apart (1997: 74–75) and "the extreme limit of the 'possible'

[where] everything gives way" (ibid.: 70). While death is a real possibility in some of the performance art that Ardenne discusses, his concept of the 'extreme' focuses on the spaces adjoining the boundary rather than the act of transgression itself. Moreover, for Ardenne, the *exter* is not transcendent but, rather, only achieves its meaning from the interplay with the elements of *extremus* in an artwork. Thinking through new extreme films is as much about considering how they are *not* transgressive as it is about considering how they breach boundaries.

This account of extremity does however chime with many twentieth-century understandings of transgression: Chris Jenks notes that "although always appearing to make reference to clear-cut distinctions, transgressions are manifestly situation-specific and vary considerably across social space and through time" (2003: 2–3). It is therefore important to be precise about the boundaries being transgressed in each film. Theorists of transgression moreover note how we must carefully examine the space either side of a boundary: as John Jervis remarks, transgression "involves hybridisation, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories" (1999: 4). Mixing is important because "what breaks the law and goes beyond the limits, also runs across, through, within, that which is thereby being limited" (ibid.). A focus on the unresolved tensions between different sides of a boundary (*extremus* and *exter*, the non-transgressive and the transgressive) and a detailed analysis of the boundaries being transgressed, is the best way of understanding the extremity of new extreme films.

The images surrounding sudden shocking images are an example of the importance of the non-transgressive in new extreme films. We see sudden close-ups of genitalia in *Anatomy of Hell [Anatomie de l'enfer]* (Breillat, 2004); movements from sex to violence in *Trouble Every Day*; changes in tempo and genre in *Twentynine Palms*. The *exter* aspects of these shocking moments

do not alone define the films and can only be understood in the context of the non-*exter* moments preceding and succeeding them. For example, sudden images of genitalia in *Anatomy of Hell* are shocking and make us very aware of those particular images, encouraging us to think about that particular genital image. In contrast, close-ups of vulvas in much conventional heterosexual pornography are not only unexceptional (and therefore not *exter*) but expected. Similarly the numerous scenes of sexual violence in *Murder-Set-Pieces* (Palumbo, 2004) render the violent sexual acts unexceptional in the context of the film and while they are still shocking in their detail, we soon become accustomed to roving shots of dismembered flesh and expect the attacks. While such repeated images are banalised and normalised in pornography and hardcore horror, the shock of suddenly being presented with viscerally challenging material draws attention to the images that came immediately before it and other images featuring similar content, which we had previously considered as unremarkable. For example, the images of genitalia in *Anatomy of Hell* draw attention to how genitalia are commonly presented, in pornography, precisely by presenting them unusually (sudden close-up) and in the unusual context of a narrative film screened in cinemas. The context of an image is therefore integral to whether it is understood as part of *exter* or not. Alison Taylor highlights the importance of a focus on the non-transgressive in transgressive films demonstrating the tensions I describe above and arguing that we neither come to terms with limits nor transcend them; rather "we experience these two poles in tension" (2017: 8). Extremity must be examined in relation both to its transgressive and non-transgressive elements, in context and in contrast to what comes before and after it.

This is one example of how images of sex and sexual violence in new extreme films can be understood according to *extremus* and *exter*. In contrast, we can associate pornography and

hardcore horror with the 'superlative spectacle' (Ardenne 2006: 95) or with another of Ardenne's notions, 'maximalism' (ibid.: 211-12). For Ardenne, the superlative spectacle is 'too codified' and 'too prefabricated' to rattle us because it remains within the defined limits of the normative. Visible images of penetration are the norm in much pornography and therefore fail to shock, even if they do within the context of a narrative film screened in cinemas. Many elements of pornography that do aim to transgress, strive towards maximalism, a tendency also noted by Linda Williams (2008: 5): porn performers' bodies are *as visible as possible*, sparse narratives make sex *as uninterrupted as possible*, noisy orgasms show sex is *as pleasurable as possible* (see Ardenne 2006: 211–12). When many aspects of a film are similar, they cease to surprise or shock or affect us; the impact of maximalist films is therefore lesser because they create a context in which each individual potentially transgressive moment is juxtaposed with other similar moments. For Ardenne, the extreme spectacle involves a balance: superlativism (not enough) and maximalism (too much) fail to shock us, fail to have any transformative impact on the spectator. By contrast, the extreme spectacle has the "power to unsettle, [the] capacity to violate intimacy, to break through our defences, to push us to into a sense of alarm, *really*" (ibid.: 95-6). This helps to explain how 'extreme' can be used to signify films which are ostensibly much less transgressive than some pornographic or horror films; more violence or sex does not make a film more impactful or transgressive. Unresolved tensions are relevant to many limits in new extreme films, not just the *amount* of sex and violence. We should be wary of generalising about the possibilities of 'extremity' over 'transgression', as Ardenne does, but his distinction between the extreme spectacle and other transgressive spectacles helps to elucidate how new extreme films are powerful, affective and challenging.

Visibility, proximity, duration

I argue that three concept pairs, operating according to the same unresolved tensions that structure my definition of extremity elucidate how best to understand the transgressions of new extreme films, their effect on the spectator and their ethical and political framing: visibility and obscurity, proximity and distance, duration and brevity. Firstly, a common shorthand for talking about extreme films is to say that they contain graphic violence and explicit sex, two terms which suppose the unusual or enhanced visibility of sex and violence. Secondly, we experience a sense of proximity to images in new extreme films through close-ups, claustrophobic atmospheres and enveloping cinematography. Moreover claims to the realism and authenticity of films or scenes are often linked to close-up images (e.g. Barker and others 2007: 70–72). Finally, duration is linked to realism and authenticity in terms of sex, violence and rape because long takes are sometimes seen as avoiding the trickeries of editing (even if computer-generated images render this untrue). Discussions of endurance, challenge and intensity also centre on the length of scenes and takes.

We must first note that each of the concept pairs contains two terms which are often considered as opposites. For instance, ‘visible’ is normally used to signal that something/someone can be seen; however, ‘visibility’ denotes only the degree to which something is visible, which encompasses full visibility (completely visible) and zero visibility (not visible at all). As such, within the term ‘visibility’, is included what is not visible: the opposite of visible. Similarly, if we take an opposite of ‘visible’, ‘obscure’, we can see that obscurity can also be used to designate *the extent* to which something is obscured. By the same logic as above, someone/something can be fully obscured or not obscured at all; obscurity as a term can therefore encompass

that which is fully visible (not at all obscured) and that which is not visible at all (fully obscured). Rather than being opposite concepts, visibility and obscurity are inextricably linked and as such will be discussed in tandem. The same logic can be applied to proximity and distance, duration and brevity: what is not proximate is distanced and what is at a small distance is proximate; a short duration is brief while what is not brief has a long duration. The phrase 'in close proximity' demonstrates the neutral meaning of these terms: although 'proximate' can be understood as meaning 'close', the abstract noun 'proximity' must be understood as neutral, encompassing both the proximate and the distanced, hence requiring the addition of 'close' to signal that the distance of separation is small. Hence, when I write of the limits of visibility, this is intrinsically linked to the the limits of obscurity. The same applies for proximity and distance, duration and brevity.

The limits of these concepts can be physical (can I see it?), moral (is it right and should I watch?), legal (these shots must be cut), endurable (can I continue watching?) amongst others. A legal limit of visibility involves what can be made visible without a film being classified as pornography (genitals, nudity, sex) or what images must be cut to secure a release (in the UK: images of eroticised sexual violence). A physical limit involves whether the image is too dark to see the characters or too disgusting to continue to look at the screen. Some of these limits overlap: a physical limit of proximity or distance involves whether the camera is so close to a person that most of their body is obscured, or is situated so far away from someone that they are barely visible. A limit of duration or brevity involves considering whether the images pass so quickly as to be difficult to see; another limit involves the length of time the spectator can endure a scene. The limits I consider are mostly related to laws, genres, arthouse and mainstream expectations, narrative-film conventions, morality, our ability to endure images, and

expectations of transgressive art, but can be broadly understood in terms of the limits of visibility, proximity and duration. The visibility of aroused genitals relates, for instance, to laws, genres, morality and arthouse expectations, amongst others. These concepts relate to extremity because the manner in which the limits of these concepts are transgressed, or not, corresponds to the unresolved tensions between *extremus* and *exter*. The limits of visibility and obscurity, proximity and distance, duration and brevity are pushed up against and marginally transgressed. Importantly the unresolved tensions in relation to boundaries are not present in only one way but rather numerous limits are pushed up against and transgressed; the overlapping of these different unresolved tensions contributes to the extremity of entire new extreme films and not just isolated images.

A recurrent example is the erect penis which is visible in numerous new extreme films and highlights the importance of considering context and *how* limits are pushed up against and transgressed. We must consider the circumstances in which it is made visible (porn film, sex scene, rape scene?), how visible it is (brief long-shot or long close-up?). Concomitantly how is the penis obscured (by other objects, by a vagina, or because the image is blurred or dark?) and how obscured it is (completely obscured or only partially?). Visible erect penises are anathema to mainstream films and yet are indispensable to most heterosexual pornography. Examining how they become visible, under what conditions and with what aesthetic, demonstrates that new extreme films actually contain very few images of erect penises, which transgress moral conventions (and enter the *exter*). Many new extreme films' depictions of sex push against but do not break the limits (are situated in the *extremus*) of what is acceptable to a mainstream public and to censorship boards. For instance, while *Twentynine Palms* contains several long and close-up takes of sex and sexualised nudity, there are no images of aroused genitals or visible penetration. Moreover, in most new extreme films, sex constitutes only a small portion

of the screen time and the fact that images of erect penises and penetration are quite rare places new extreme films, in terms of visibility, beyond the limits of what is generally understood as pornography: there simply is not enough visible penetration. Thus, in this example of the visibility of erect penises, new extreme films do transgress limits (*exter*). However, most of a new extreme film's images either occupy the space inside boundaries relating to visibility (*extremus*) or are uncontroversial in terms of visibility (shots of clothed people, for instance).

Comparable arguments can be made for proximity and duration: shots can be very close and takes very long but these are offset by shorter, distanced shots. On the one hand, this emphasises the proximity of a shot when close, or the length of a take when long by contrast with surrounding images and creates greater possibilities for shock by sudden juxtaposition. On the other hand, this means that new extreme films retain enough mainstream conventions in relation to visibility, proximity and duration to be considered as narrative feature films and released in cinemas rather than being confined to museums or art galleries. While there are numerous extreme close-ups in *Trouble Every Day*, most of the film consists of long shots, medium-long shots, medium close-ups and close-ups: this does not differ hugely from the standard selection of shots used in mainstream narrative films. In terms of duration, although new extreme films do feature a longer average shot length than in mainstream narrative films, this average is much shorter than the average shot length of pornographic films (Frey 2016: 168–69).[3] Moreover, when placed in comparison with the exceedingly long takes of *Russian Ark [Русский Ковчег]* (Sokurov, 2002) or *Victoria* (Schipper, 2015), even the 10-minute-plus single takes in *Irreversible* or *The Tribe* seem relatively short.[4] While new extreme films do go beyond mainstream aesthetic conventions in terms of proximity and duration by making images close and

[3] Frey compares the average of 7.2 seconds per shot in the 2-minute fellatio scene in *9 Songs* to 3 professional internet porn clips with average shot lengths of 41, 31 and 19 seconds.
[4] *Russian Ark* and *Victoria* have average shot lengths of 96 and 138 minutes respectively.

long, they only slightly and infrequently cross these boundaries, remaining generally within norms.

Therefore, by conceiving of extremity as the unresolved tensions between elements on both sides of a boundary, and by examining many aspects of new extreme films in this light, we come to a fuller understanding of what extremity means and what makes new extreme films challenging, controversial and ethically powerful. New extreme films are replete with examples of unresolved tensions which can be understood in terms of *extremus* and *exter*. Many limits are transgressed but only marginally as well as being pushed up against. This overlapping of so many aspects of the films operating in this 'extreme' way is what is specific to new extreme films.

In identifying this structuring device of a form of extremity based on *extremus* and *exter*, this thesis does several things. It presents an argument for the specificity of new extreme films as distinct from other contemporary films sometimes categorised together with the films I analyse here, such as new French horror, spectacle horror, hardcore horror, pornographic horror, conventional pornography, Asia extreme, hardcore romantic comedies and hardcore coming-of-age films. I also move beyond the restrictive questions of whether new extreme films are progressive or retrogressive because they should be understood as playing with the boundaries of such categories. More broadly, I am positing an engagement with genre theory that complements but also moves beyond Derridean approaches. My approach to genre is implicit within the following chapters but ultimately crystallises around the use of abstract concepts (here extremity) to define a genre combined with an understanding of the boundaries of genre categories as governed by unresolved tensions. This novel approach to boundaries between, for instance, pornography and not-pornography allows me to see certain films as operating at and

beyond the limits of both not-pornography and pornography, accepting that these categories do exist and provide structuring schemas for spectatorial understanding and judgement, even as each is inadequate to properly account for any single film. Most importantly, this thesis revisits the concept of 'extremity', demonstrating that it has philosophical weight, both to understand 'extreme' artworks and, beyond taxonomic concerns, to rethink how we conceptualise boundaries and limits.

Methodology

Having set out the novel claims of this thesis and sketched out the scholarly backdrop against which these claims are made, I must note certain points about the film-analytical methodology used in pursuing my claims. While my analysis is conceptual and theoretical, it also places great emphasis on the film-viewing experience. This sometimes relies on common assumptions and expectations of films, of what 'mainstream', 'conventional', 'narrative film' or 'pornography' mean. It also consists in an analysis of a spectator's affective reaction(s) to the images presented in new extreme films. The question then arises of what 'spectator' means, to whom it refers and what evidence I will supply to support claims about corporeal reactions.

The spectator I refer to bears certain resemblances to Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological spectator because my focus is on the subjective experience of watching new extreme films, how this experience is brought about by a film and how this experience can be understood as ethical or political. I understand the film-viewing experience as inherently embodied in the sense that "rather than seeking essences", I am concerned with "the meaning of experience as it is embodied and lived in context" (Sobchack 2004: 2). In relation to new extreme films, this means being especially receptive to the bodily reactions we can have to a film, such as arousal,

disgust, fear, shock and discomfort. Like Sobchack, I avail myself of popular sources and an audience-response study (Barker and others 2007) to discover how individual spectators responded to the films as well as my own personal experiences to propel and substantiate the analysis (Sobchack 2004: 6). As Rosi Braidotti notes, it is "important not to confuse [the] process of subjectivity with individualism or particularity: subjectivity is a socially mediated process" (ibid.). My analysis of *individual* responses (including my own) provides a means of analysing the *subjective* encounter we have with new extreme films. Importantly this approach is not dependent on a spectator having had any particular past experiences nor even on them being sympathetic to my reading of the films but "whether or not the description is resonant and the experience's structure sufficiently comprehensible to a reader who might 'possibly' inhabit it (even if in a differently inflected or valued way)" (ibid.: 5). I can refer to generalizable qualities of spectatorial reactions to a film without this being undermined by a single viewer experiencing the film differently; it is important only that my interpretation is 'sufficiently comprehensible' to a possible spectator who is both abstract, in not existing specifically, and concrete, in being any person who might watch the film. This chimes with how Laura Marks brings together the abstract and the concrete when describing the individual spectator's memory as working together with a film's images to produce multisensory images (2000: 22). Marks evokes an abstract spectator, able to feel the images multisensorially, who is nonetheless always particular because "these sensory experiences are, of course, differentially available to viewers depending on their own sensoria" even if senses, and reactions to particular triggers, are culturally learned (ibid.: 23). My model of spectatorship thus draws implicitly on some of the founding assumptions of phenomenological film theory without addressing further concepts such as the film body, theorised by Sobchack.

I am therefore inspired by Jenny Chamarette's negotiations of a way through the complex webs of engagement, power and affect that constitute what we generally denote as spectatorship. Questioning the relevance of both psychoanalytical and reception-studies approaches to film spectatorship, Chamarette asks "is there, indeed, a 'we' that can be spoken of articulately in terms of film and moving-image spectatorship, viewing and participation?" (2013: 45). Her answer is to posit:

> a different kind of subjective encounter, which is not dyadic, but which founds itself upon the multiple, sensuous, sometimes pre-cognitive, sometimes deeply contextual contacts with the world (and the cinematic world), dependent on an embodied, not screened mediation with that world. Thus, the bond between self and other, subject and object, in psychoanalytic film theory, is not done away with, but rather re-written in a more relational, plural mode. (Chamarette 2013: 46)

Chamarette's approach acknowledges the multiple experiences possible for any individual viewer, emphasising the importance of focusing on our corporeal responses as much as any cognitive engagement with a film's images, whilst retaining but reshaping the idea of an abstract spectator produced by the film, but not limited to the passive, powerless receptacle posited by psychoanalytic film theory. Drawing similar conclusions via V.F.Perkin's claim that critical judgement "depends on a predictability of *dominant* responses", Alison Taylor suggests that the viewer is not "a cohesive category that can be said to respond in delimited ways determined by the text", but rather that her corpus "encourage[s] discomfort in the audience through observable aesthetic choices" (2017: 15n12, 10). Taylor's approach valorises an emphasis on the precise form that encourages affective responses, whilst also legitimising analyses that are agreed upon by many but not all viewers.

At the same time, I reject the suggestion that the viewer (abstract or actual) is‘passive’. As Jacques Rancière notes, “looking is also an action […] The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: They observe, select, compare, interpret” (2007: 277; translation modified). Rancière questions the common assumption that looking is opposed to knowing or acting simply because the spectator remains motionless. For Rancière, this assumption supposes a binary distinction between activity and passivity, which is not tenable given the observations, selections, comparisons and interpretations the spectator undertakes while looking (ibid.: 275-7). Rather than considering the spectator of a new extreme film as active in comparison to other films which encourage passivity, I focus on the experience of watching a new extreme film. Does it make us think about a subject differently and, if so, how are such alternative thoughts encouraged? Do the films induce reflection in conventional or unconventional ways? What political change is effected in the experience of being made to think in such a way? My concern is less *whether* a spectator thinks (all spectators do), and more *what thoughts* we are encouraged to think and *by what means* such thoughts are encouraged. Importantly I can only suggest what we are encouraged to think, contentions based on numerous evidence sources; I cannot claim every viewer will respond to the unresolved tensions of extremity identically. Concomitant with my discussion of ‘the spectator’ and actual spectators, these conclusions are drawn from my own experiences, other people’s experiences and extrapolations about sufficiently comprehensible experiences which pertain to an abstract-yet-individualised spectator.

This approach has affinities with Wheatley’s and Michele Aaron’s linking of spectatorship to ethics. Firstly my comments about spectators being encouraged to think in alternative ways draw on Wheatley’s analysis of the films of Michael Haneke. Wheatley argues that in Haneke’s films, “aesthetic reflexivity is conducive to the spectator’s moral reflexivity” (2009: 5) and that her analysis aims “to account for what precisely the relationship between formal reflexivity

and moral reflexivity is" (ibid.). For Wheatley, the ethical thrust of Haneke's films lies in how films encourage the spectator to come "to terms with [their] personal moral relationship to the film" (ibid.: 8) and her analysis links the films' formal or aesthetic reflexivity to the spectator's moral reflexivity just as I do in relation to new extreme films. A subjective idea of spectatorship as outlined above is the link between the films and an ethical reflection on morality, firstly because it is in the act of watching that we are made to rethink: the ethics of Haneke's films and new extreme films are not inherent to the images but only arise in the spectatorial encounter. Secondly, a subjective notion of spectatorship is pertinent because the reactions of individual spectators are different: just as Wheatley claims about Haneke's films, new extreme films rely "precisely on each viewer having a different relationship to the film, and so creates a cinematic form to which the spectator's response is personal and subjective" (ibid.: 9). Spectatorship in new extreme films is similarly integral to their ethical power: ethical reflection arises as we watch and because we watch.

Aaron emphasises the necessity of being precise about the nature of spectatorship in any analysis which focuses on ethics: "film spectatorship […] does not just appeal to ethical thought but in some ways *is* the ethical encounter" (2007: 112). What interests Aaron is the nature of that ethical encounter, an approach which parallels Wheatley's overall aims in relation to Haneke's films. One essential distinction, which Aaron makes about different forms of ethical encounter, is between morality and ethics. Ethics is understood as "thinking through one's relationship to morality rather than just adhering to it" (ibid.: 108), similar to what Wheatley terms 'moral reflexivity' (2009: 5). The distinction between ethics and morality for Aaron is crucial because "within it lies the all-important prioritisation of (ethical) recognition, realisation, reflection – the stuff of agency – over (moral) prescription, proclamation and punishment – the stuff of ideology" (2007: 108) and like Aaron, I am interested in film's capacity to elicit ethical

reflection. Investigating the nature of a film's relation to ideology and to viewer agency can only take place through an analysis of the spectator-screen relationship and the ethical encounter forged as a person watches a film. Moreover, as well as being inherently ethical, spectatorship also has an inherently political dimension: Aaron notes that distinguishing ethics from morality in spectatorship identifies a subject's relationship to the condition of their existence (ibid.). She argues that we must ascertain "whether that relationship is characterized by a self-aware consent […] or an instant and unthinking acceptance" (ibid.). The language here can be read as more explicitly political if we understand Aaron as referring to a person's political condition, to their acceptance of social structures, prevailing ideology and cultural conventions. Becoming self-aware about our position within networks of power or social relations and subsequently thinking or acting differently would constitute a political engagement with specific ideologies, specific socio-political power structures and interpersonal relations. Understood this way, spectatorship is inherently ethical *and* political.

My contention is that new extreme films bring these inherent ethical and poilitical aspects of spectatorship to the fore by confrontationally exposing spectators to uncomfortable encounters with images of sex and violence. In the midst of this provocative encounter, the viewer is encouraged to look at people, images and events in alternative ways to those to which they may be accustomed. In this thesis, I will use 'ethical' to refer to this form of thinking through our relation to morality, of (re)considering our relation to other people, of thinking through the power structures which govern our interpersonal relations and how a filmic encounter can alter these. I separate this ethical framework from what I term political topics which designate the specific social structures, ideologies and cultural conventions which we are made to think about in alternative ways. Under 'ethics' I will discuss concepts such as altered perspectives, modes of spectatorship and confrontational spectatorial encounters; while under 'politics' I consider

how these pertain to questions of feminism, sexualised bodies, Mexican class politics and the politics of rape, amongst others. While the political subjects vary from film to film, a common ethical framework can be seen across all new extreme films.

Chapter summaries

This thesis is split into four chapters: extremity, visibility, proximity and duration. Chapter 1 lays the theoretical ground and intellectual context of the thesis. I begin by outlining the complexities to be negotiated in thinking about the extremity of new extreme films and then move onto a discussion of scholarly insights into extreme film and literature. Violence or provocation as modes of address, self-reflexivity, a challenging of spectatorial conventions and the commercial potential of shock are shown to be useful ways of approaching new extreme films and their ethical potential. A detailed discussion of extremity follows, in which I define the 'extreme image' in contrast to 'images of the extreme'. I give an intellectual history to the ethical framework outlined briefly in this introduction pointing out the key terms from the history of film ethics, especially the work of Sarah Cooper, Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, that inform my conception of ethics. Subsequently I outline the strands of Silverman's, Kuppers's and Kozol's thought which bear on new extreme films and explain how they fit into the broader concept of film ethics as understood by Cooper, Downing and Saxton. A discussion follows of the diegetic content of new extreme films and the chapter concludes with my methodological approach to film analysis, theory and film-philosophy.

The close analyses of individual films begin in Chapter 2 in which I explore the importance of visibility and obscurity, in the extreme image. I argue that many commentaries on new extreme

films focus on the visibility or obscurity of sex and violence when describing a film's challenging nature. I therefore question the relation between visibility and obscurity as well as the limits of visibility and the limits of watchability. Censorship is a good example of the interlinking of visibility, extremity and ethics being often based on the visibility of sex or violence, but is also inspired by what people think *should* be made visible, what people consider *should* be watchable by other people, that is, what people consider is *extremus* (and therefore watchable) and *exter* (and therefore beyond the limits of the watchable). Visibility introduces a quotient of authenticity into the image by creating modal ambiguities between the real and the fictional, especially with visible erections, genital fluids, penetration, vomit and surgery. This sense of authenticity is also communicated in how objects are made visible and I suggest that aesthetic similarities to documentary film further evoke authenticity. A lack of visibility (obscurity) plays into a sense of authenticity as we are encouraged to feel as though we are experiencing a character's emotions. As the image spins disorientingly, is plunged into darkness or becomes so blurry as to make everything unclear we feel as though we are in that dark room or inside the madman's head. Obscurity also becomes relevant in thinking about the more metaphorical visibility of the narratives, which in certain films are relatively unclear. I analyse *The Idiots*, *Baise-moi*, *Intimacy* (Chéreau, 2001) and *A Hole in My Heart [Ett hål i mitt hjärta]* (Moodysson, 2004) in terms of visibility and *Sombre*, *Irreversible* and *A New Life* in terms of obscurity.

Chapter 3 focuses on proximity and develops the work in chapter 2 about realism, shock, disgust and arousal in order to reflect on the spatial elements communicated by extreme images. The films examined in this chapter bring us close to people and objects, often to the limits of easy identification or conventional characterisation. The experience is sometimes felt to be enveloping, intense and disturbing in ways that encourage us to consider why we continue to

submit ourselves to such an experience, and what such discomfort might say about the images. Proximity is felt through images of touch, penetration, perforation and extirpation, concepts which I will show can be understood as relating to each other in terms of limits: penetration as at and beyond the limits of touch, for instance. The work of Beugnet and Marks is highly productive in considering how certain images communicate sensation and the philosophical consequences of doing so. Moreover, I explore different ethical theories of proximity in order to demonstrate that proximity and ethics can usefully be thought together in ways that are commensurate with the ethical framework outlined in chapter 1. Chapter 3 examines *Romance*, *Trouble Every Day*, *In My Skin*, *9 Songs*, *Anatomy of Hell*, *Taxidermia* and *A Serbian Film* to argue that the forms of proximate, affective encounter we experience in the films challenge us on a visceral level to rethink how we engage with bodies, sex, pornography and body politics. I suggest that we are encouraged to consider the materiality and physicality of sex and violence, rather than to watch it in distanced separation; that we are asked to question taboos around images and public discussion of menstruation and childbirth; and that we come to question the violences of pornography. Moving from more pleasurable to more painful scenarios, this chapter also emphasises how proximity and extremity are common features of films with divergent political themes.

Chapter 4 builds upon the work on visibility and proximity, focussing on the temporal experience of watching new extreme films. Long takes and long scenes are common during scenes of sex and violence in new extreme films and I draw on Stanley Keeling's idea of 'processive' duration to think through the communication of temporality when watching these films. In long scenes with few aesthetic changes, we experience the moment-by-moment passing of an event and are encouraged to experience each moment individually rather than reducing a scene to a totalising description: 'cunnilingus', 'murder', 'rape'. Instead we notice the flicks of a tongue,

the blows of a fist, the smarting of a cheek. In new extreme films, this is often linked with an evocation of witnessing that Roy Brand has termed 'ethical witnessing'. In being drawn into the 'processive' duration of the acts, we are encouraged to feel as though we have witnessed the events and therefore to take on the ethical role of a witness. Ethical witnessing is often linked to our being pushed to the limits of what we are willing to endure, to the limits of conventional scene lengths, to the limits of the narrative information that can be drawn from a scene. This ethical-witness role is of someone who thinks through and helps others to respond better to violent and sexual acts in the future, even if the ontological status of the witness is missing. Analysing *Fat Girl*, *Irreversible*, *The Brown Bunny*, *Twentynine Palms*, *Battle in Heaven*, *Free Will*, *Antichrist* and *The Tribe*, I argue that the durational qualities of many images invite the spectator to rethink both how we look at images, how we as spectators are implicated in the acts we see and how they are represented.

The following chapters, focussing on visibility then proximity then duration, proceed from the simplest aspect (whether something is visible or not) towards the most complex (the experience of time). While questions of visibility, proximity and duration arise in all three chapters, separating the analysis of these three concepts provides the most compelling way of understanding why particular images become connoted as extreme images and how extreme images function ethically and politically. Some films are mentioned in multiple chapters but each film is only examined in detail in one chapter, firstly in order to explore as many films as possible and therefore to strengthen my argument about the breadth of this concept of extremity and of this ethical framework. Secondly, because not all the films participate in the genre of new extreme films identically and therefore some films are more invested in questions of visibility than duration, or proximity than visibility. Almost all the films could be examined in any of the chapters but *The Tribe*, which is made up entirely of long takes, lends itself more to a discussion of

duration, while *9 Songs*, with its unusually visible sex acts, lends itself especially to a discussion of visibility. While I cannot point out all the ways in which duration is relevant to *9 Songs* and proximity to *The Tribe*, I hope that to enable readers to make such connections themselves within the examples I provide.

This thesis is about new extreme films and extremity as *extremus* and *exter*; but also about the ethical frameworks that the evocation of unresolved tensions can create, about the political consequences of confronting a spectator in this way, and the ramifications this has for thinking about limits, boundaries and genres.

Chapter 1 – Extremity

This chapter outlines in detail the concept of extremity as an evocation of unresolved tensions between *extremus* and *exter*. It demonstrates how extremity is connected to but also distinct from certain understandings of transgression and how extremity is of particular value in analysing the experience of watching new extreme films. This is firstly to understand the challenging nature of new extreme films and to move towards an understanding of why they have been grouped together under the heading of 'new extreme'. Moreover the concept of extremity in contrast especially to 'maximalism' and 'superlativism' helps to distinguish new extreme films from other films designated as 'extreme' by scholars. My analysis of extremity develops a way of understanding genre which is based on the unresolved tensions between *extremus* and *exter*. Conceiving of new extreme films as a genre based on extremity allows me to highlight how new extreme films operate at and beyond the limits of genres such as arthouse, horror, pornography and narrative film. Secondly, extremity provides a pertinent structure for analysing the cinematographic form of new extreme films. The visibility of aroused genitalia, close-ups on

sex and violence, and the length of scenes of sexual violence are frequently noted by commentators. By approaching these formal tropes from the perspective of extremity, we can see that the pushing up against and transgressing of the limits of visibility and obscurity, proximity and distance, duration and brevity provide the key to the cinematographic particularities of new extreme films. The subsequent chapters provide details of how limits and tensions relating to visibility and obscurity, proximity and distance, duration and brevity create such a challenging viewing experience.

Finally, this chapter explains how the experience of watching new extreme films can be understood as ethical and political. Having worked out the form of extremity at work in new extreme films and how this creates a particularly challenging experience for the viewer, it is important to consider the effects of this extremity beyond the immediate corporeal or intellectual reactions of the spectator. I argue that the particular provocations of new extreme films create an ethical encounter that encourages viewers to see alternative meanings in and explanations for the images they view on the screen. The films highlight and challenge conventional or common ideas about sex, violence and sexual violence, and present alternative meanings and conceptualisations of these acts and images. This allows me to suggest an ethics of extremity, that new extreme films can be understood as ethical, as humanist and as engaged in thinking about progressive politics, even if this often takes place in the context of retrogressive ideas and thus cannot always be considered as entirely successful.

As an example, *Twentynine Palms* tells the story of a couple, Katia and David, wandering around a rural Californian town. Here there are unresolved tensions at the limits of several categories: genre, narrative form, depictions of sex, and arthouse film. *Twentynine Palms* does

not fit easily into any genre being at once road movie, romance, erotic romp, existential cogitation and horror fest without ever being fully any of these. It pushes at the limits of these genres, and sometimes transgresses them: it is a romance film with a couple who declare their love, have sex, fight, make up and spend time alone without any third party. Nonetheless, they share little common language, communicating in pidgin French (she is Russian, he is English), exchange few ideas beyond superficial comments and their sex is passionate but seemingly emotionless, placing the film at the limits of what can be understood as romantic. Beyond this, there are numerous long scenes that ignore the couple entirely, focussing on views of the countryside with little obvious link to the couple's romance, and go beyond any conventional expectations of a romance. Linked to romance are the sex scenes which are numerous, graphic and long. However, these scenes do not conform to the conventions of pornography, romances or much mainstream sex: they are long and graphic like in pornography but there are no shots of genitals; there is little meaning attached to individual encounters as in romances, and the sex appears to be needed rather than desired or even especially pleasurable as in most on-screen sex. Thus while it appeals to the conventions of several types of on-screen sex, it is seemingly at the limit of or beyond these categories, participating in but not really recognisable as pornographic, romantic or pleasurable sex.

Considering the film as a whole, there are also unresolved tensions between narrative and non-narrative form: the narrative is sparse, episodic and it is hard to identify a cause-and-effect logic or psychological explanation linking scenes, putting it at the limits of what we can consider as a narrative film rather than a non-narrative series of vignettes. Nonetheless, the film does not eschew narrative entirely and at the end, action, cause-and-effect logic and psychological explanations return: the narrative progresses with rape and a resulting murder and sui-

cide taking place within minutes. Before this, their sex and arguments seemed without consequence, ebbing and flowing without changing the relationship. *Twentynine Palms*'s narrative structure is unusual and therefore at the limits of narrative conventions, but it is still recognisably a Western narrative film, with an ostensibly chronological progression to a climax. At the same time, it is frequently regarded as an exception with regard to Dumont's oeuvre, as beyond the limits of the rest of his oeuvre and the meditative existential tradition he was considered to work in, an *exter* of his oeuvre if you will. Unlike his other films, it was filmed outside France, it is not obviously political or religious, its emphasis on sex and violence sharply distinguishes it from the Bressonian heritage attributed to his other films and it was hated by many ardent Dumont fans, most notably James Quandt.[5] While such *extremus* and *exter* moments, which trouble the limits of genre, narrative cinema and understandings of the director's oeuvre, could be individually attributed to many films, the extremity of *Twentynine Palms* lies in there being so many of these unresolved tensions around conventional category boundaries. This close attention to the form of new extreme films' transgressions and in relation to all other elements of the films, is integral to comprehending their extremity and the ethical force which such extremity has.

The challenging viewing experience of new extreme films such as *Twentynine Palms* and the difficulty of understanding their effects has led to significant critical and scholarly interest. The first significant scholarly intervention was by Horeck and Kendall who provide several useful suggestions for thinking through the relations between new extreme films:

> it is first and foremost the uncompromising and highly self-reflexive appeal to the spectator that marks out the specificity of these films for us, [... as well as the] complex and

[5] This exceptionality within an oeuvre can also be seen in criticism on *Trouble Every Day* and Claire Denis, *9 Songs* and Michael Winterbottom.

> often contradictory ways in which these films situate sex and violence as a means of interrogating the relationship between films and their spectators in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In their concerted practice of provocation as a mode of address, the films of the new extremism bring the notion of response to the fore, interrogating, challenging and often destroying the notion of a passive or disinterested spectator in ways that are productive for film theorising today. (Horeck and Kendall 2011: 1–2)

This quotation posits four central aspects to new extreme films: self-reflexivity, a complex and often contradictory nature, provocation as a mode of address, and the destruction of the passive spectator. These form a good starting point for conceptualising what is specific about this form of cinematic extremity. Moreover Horeck and Kendall are well aware of the difficulties of their term, 'new extremism', the complex historical lineage of terms such as 'transgression' and 'extremity', and the challenge they posed to their contributors in attempting to define the extremity of the films discussed: "graphic representation and the tradition of artistic transgression have complex histories, and the definition of what one takes to constitute extreme is notoriously subjective, slippery and bound by historical and social pressures" (2011: 5). This thesis builds on their conclusions by considering the provocations in greater detail, by suggesting exactly how reflection comes about and proposing a precise model of the form of spectatorship produced when watching new extreme films. Most importantly these considerations will be linked to the designation of these films as extreme through my rethinking of extremity in terms of *extremus* and *exter*.

It is however necessary to move outside of cinema scholarship for a moment because other explorations of contemporary extremity have been undertaken in relation to the novel, notably in *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* (Durand and Mandel 2006) and *Around the Literary*

Extreme [Autour de l'extrême littéraire] (Hemmens and Williams 2012). Although the experiences of reading a novel and watching a film are undoubtedly different, the techniques used to convey extremity differ greatly and the processes of creation, distribution and exhibition are quite separate, theorisations of contemporary literary extremity deserve attention for three principal reasons. Firstly, these scholars link newness and extremity together in similar ways to scholars of new extreme films. Secondly, the publication dates of many of the novels discussed in these essays about literature overlap significantly with the release dates of new extreme films, suggesting there is a broader cultural significance to the conflation of extremity and newness/contemporaneity. Finally, many terms used to consider the novels defined as extreme – immediacy, proximity, fragmentation, violence as ethos, paradox, limits, transgression and extremity – feature in scholarly examinations of new extreme films.

Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel identify a blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction as one of the most important characteristics of the 'contemporary extreme'; they name this *autofiction*: "the deliberate erasure of the distinction between [an author's] biographical and fictional selves" (2006: 2). Although I do not discuss a 'biographical self' in the context of films, this suggests a breaking down of the boundary between the world of the diegesis and that of the spectator/reader, an idea which evokes immediacy, proximity and a modal ambiguity between real and fiction.[6] Furthermore, Durand and Mandel argue that "novels of the contemporary extreme perform immediacy and proximity, forcing a rethinking, or dissolution, of traditional causal relations, specifically between reality and art" (2006: 4). This quotation makes explicit the links to proximity, explored in chapter 3, and how the reader of these books is provoked into rethinking the nature of the relationship between their reality and the work of art. This foreshadows my conception of the ethics of new extreme films as compelling the

[6] I explore modal ambiguity in chapter 2.

viewer to rethink their relationship to the film and the events depicted, although I will especially consider a 're-education of the look', a rethinking of how we look, which differs from Durand and Mandel's claims about literature. Finally, Durand and Mandel point to how expected forms of stability, such as an adherence to narrative, aesthetic and generic conventions, dissolve, making it difficult for the reader to orientate themselves in relation to the events depicted: "violence – often the only stable element – operates as ethos" (2006: 5). Not only is violence between characters and towards the reader a structuring element of these novels, but other stabilising props which the reader might use to maintain emotional distance from the events are broken down. In my reading of new extreme films, the destabilisation of anchoring devices such as narrative and generic conventions makes the violence of new extreme films especially intense and provocative. Although the medium through which extremity is conveyed might be different, how these new extreme art forms function is comparable and therefore how extremity is theorised in this literary context is a useful addition to thinking about new extreme films.

Alastair Hemmens and Russell Williams do not focus exclusively on contemporary literature but still use a comparable definition of extremity to Durand and Mandel characterising their corpus of 'extreme' literature as one which "shocks us, excites us, and horrifies us. Above all it invokes strong emotions" (2012: 4). Most usefully for this thesis, they engage directly with the term 'extreme' in ways that resound with the extremity we experience when watching new extreme films. Indeed, despite their literary corpus, the examples in their introduction of how we engage with extremity in contemporary society are all audiovisual: hardcore pornography, snuff films, images of torture and war, 24-hour news (2012: 1). Hemmens and Williams suggest that 'transgression' as a term is inadequate to account for their corpus because while contemporary violence is still shocking and disturbing, it is simultaneously pervasive, banalised

and commercially valued (ibid.). What is transgressive about transgression, they ask, if it has become banal, accepted and uncontroversial? This is where the *form* of extremity becomes of the utmost importance, as does being specific about the extremity of a book or film: while record-breaking sprinters transgress boundaries every time a record is broken and risky stunts performed for television adverts transgress by putting the stuntman's life in danger, these co-opted and accepted transgressions are quite different from criminal transgressions, which lead to jail, and aesthetic transgressions, which challenge artistic conventions. Transgression therefore has many almost contradictory manifestations: among them, those that are desired (sports records), dangerous (legal transgressions) and everything in between. In art, where transgressions of conventions can be transformative (a new style or movement) or ridiculed (bad art), the question arises of what forms of transgression have an impact on the viewer/reader. If some forms of transgression have become banalised, which forms, if any, have the power to encourage a viewer/reader to rethink their understanding of the world?

Hemmens and Williams turn to Michel Foucault's reading of Bataille and draw a distinction between what they consider to be the closed possibilities of transgression and the open possibilities of extremity. Foucault argues that transgression is neither negative nor positive but rather an affirmation both of the limit itself and the innate limitlessness that the transgression of a limit opens up:

> Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time. But, correspondingly, this affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can bind it, since by definition, no limit can restrict it. […] The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely

> uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. (Foucault 1977: 34–35)

For Foucault, transgression is how we make sense of a world without a God: once we remove the possibility of an infinite being, the world is finite. Where an infinite world is limited by an infinite Godhead ("the limit of the Limitless" [ibid.: 32]), a finite world (paradoxically) knows no real limits, and this finite lack of limits is affirmed in the possible transgression of any limit ("the limitless reign of the Limit" [ibid.]).

Following Foucault, we must take a more neutral approach to transgression than is often the case, when we try to see ethical or revolutionary power in the simple fact of boundary-crossing: "transgression is neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world)" (ibid.: 35). Seeing transgression as this fundamental aspect of modern life, neither positive nor negative, and inherently tied to the notion of limits, parallels Bataille, to whom Foucault's essay is dedicated, who described transgression as that which "does not deny the taboo, but transcends and completes it" (1986: 63); it is the co-constituent of the taboo. Or as Michael Richardson notes in his analysis of Bataille, transgression is a 'dynamic' concept which is in "a complex moral relation in which neither [transgression nor taboo] has any privileged status *vis-à-vis* the other. Transgression does not 'subvert' the taboo: it completes and reinforces it" (1994: 9). Transgression is a relative concept, changing its definition as the limits it breaches, move. In transgressing a limit, one just moves that limit and thus, in Richardson's words, one 'completes and reinforces' the limit rather than fundamentally altering it. Far from being revolutionary or transformative, transgression is a necessary building block in modern society.

Hemmens and Williams draw the conclusion from Foucault's analysis that "transgression is a fundamentally conservative gesture" on the grounds that "it reinforces the transgressed limit, catching the committed transgressor in a never-ending spiral of transgression and punishment" (2012: 1). For Hemmens and Williams, the neutral nature of transgression is read as conservative because it does nothing to change the status quo. They therefore look to theories of extremity for a progressive way of challenging boundaries because "in contrast [to transgression], the extreme experience appears to move beyond this infinite loop" of breaching and reaffirming a limit (ibid.: 1-2). Enticing as it is to pit a progressive notion of extremity against a conservative notion of transgression, attributing the former to politically progressive arthouse films and the latter to politically retrogressive forms of violent entertainment and pornography, we must be wary of this understanding of extremity both per se and in relation to new extreme films. Firstly, although extremity may be defined as a different engagement with boundaries to transgression, they both remain inherently linked to that boundary; just as transgression pushes the boundary further away demonstrating its relativism, so will the boundary which marks the difference between the *extremus* (outermost interior edge) and *exter* (area just beyond a boundary) of extremity also be altered by changes in definitions of the norm. Hemmens and Williams posit extremity as a way of overcoming transgression without accepting that extremity is bound by the same difficulties as transgression: if extremity involves the movement from one side of a boundary to another, how much movement can the boundary take before it simply ceases to be a boundary? Secondly, an excessive emphasis on the notion of limits and borders in extremity underplays the importance of closely analysing *how* those borders are pushed up against and transgressed.

I do nevertheless concur with Hemmens and Williams that certain forms of contemporary extreme art use images of sex and violence to achieve impactful transgressions that are qualitatively different from the banalised images of sex and violence we see in pornography or action-adventure films. Extremity in terms of *extremus* and *exter* can place boundaries in question, challenge the rationale for their existence and provoke debate about them. One putting-in-question of boundaries can be seen in the reconsideration of legal boundaries after a new extreme film's release. *Baise-moi*, for instance, was classified as pornography in France and subsequently forced the reintroduction of an '18' certificate after concerted protests around the world.[7] In the UK, *Romance* raised controversies around categorisation and obscenity when Channel 4 wanted to show it on television,[8] and *9 Songs* became the first film to feature visible male ejaculation without being classified in the UK as pornographic, thus contributing to the British Board of Film Classification's (BBFC) changing definition of pornography. They did not simply transgress the legal boundaries to find themselves banned – transcending and completing the taboo (Bataille 1986: 63) – but contributed to rethinking the boundary.

Aside from a discussion of what 'extreme' actually means, we must also note how the cultural attraction to aspects of transgression highlighted by Hemmens and Williams encourages the use of the adjective 'extreme' to advertise as well as denigrate films, regardless of how pertinent the word is as a descriptor. Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano highlight how the 'extreme' in 'Asia Extreme' is not an academic term which they have chosen as specifically illustrative of their corpus but rather was chosen by distributors as a marketing device: "'Asia Extreme' is a distribution/marketing term rather than a production category […]. In fact, some of the films were released retroactively and categorized as such after the launch of the label

[7] See http://www.conseil-etat.fr/Actualites/Communiques/Annulation-du-visa-d-exploitation-avec-interdiction-aux-mineurs-de-16-ans-pour-le-film-Baise-moi [accessed 13.04.2017].
[8] See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/976437.stm [accessed 13.04.2017].

[Tartan Asia Extreme]" (2009: 5). With an array of films that stretch from relatively bloodless horror films through gory tales of torture, murder and mutilation to political thrillers, the label Tartan Asia Extreme shows the extent to which the term 'extreme' can become detached from dictionary definitions and the etymological roots of *extremus* and *exter* I have outlined, taking on a banal brand meaning.

However this use of 'extreme' as a marketing tool is not just a matter of opportunistic distributors hoping to increase sales by linking films to extremity. Steve Jones argues that critics also label films as 'extreme' to denigrate, and to instigate a form of cultural censorship brought about by "pundits' limited grasp of what is happening on the peripheries of commercial filmmaking" (2013: 185). Jones argues that an approach to depictions of torture and violence which includes *all* contemporary images, not just those that receive a general cinema release, demonstrates how 'extreme porn' and 'hardcore horror' are far more transgressive than the 'torture porn' regularly decried as extreme by critics. According to criteria based on spectacles of violence and the eroticisation of violence often singled out by critics, it makes no sense to call 'torture porn' extreme (ibid.: 127). For Jones, 'extreme' is on the outer edge of all existing depictions and 'torture porn' can only be identified as such by those who know little about anything more violent, gory or sexual than most 'torture porn'. In this case, critics are implicitly trying to attach the legal and moral opprobrium that could be levelled at those depictions at the peripheries of filmmaking to 'torture porn' films in order to unfairly denigrate them (ibid.). Although Jones's, Choi's and Wada-Marciano's filmic corpora are different from my own, they highlight the mutability of the term 'extreme' which means that it can be used vaguely to denigrate as well as to promote and advertise. It is such critical imprecisions that this thesis aims to redress.

All these comments highlight the importance of being precise about what is extreme or transgressive about new extreme films. Just as Jones argues that critics overstate the extremity of 'torture porn' films, so does Frey point out how frequently critics and scholars overstate the innovations and transgressions of new extreme films (2016: 8). In many key respects, new extreme films can be understood as less transgressive than other genres and so we must investigate how new extreme films' transgressions create controversy, debate and provocation while individual pornographic or horror films rarely do. Pornography has long made public visible sexual acts, while horror films such as *Braindead* (Jackson, 1992) and *August Underground* (Vogel, 2001) feature far bloodier and gorier acts of violence, torture and rape than can be seen in new extreme films. Pornography horror films such as *Saw: A Hardcore Parody* (Chibbles, 2010) or *Re-penetrator* (Sakmann, 2004) combine pornography and torture in more visible, prolonged and gory ways than anything in new extreme films and sites such as *heavy-r.com* show thousands of videos of real-life violent sex or eroticised violence which operate in different spheres of transgression than new extreme films. Being specific about how the *extremus* and *exter* of extremity is applicable to new extreme films, and clearly demonstrating what boundaries are being transgressed, enables us to see what is specific about new extreme films and how they have a provocative impact that ostensibly more transgressive images do not create.

Extremity – Ardenne and Baudry

Within the fields of film, literature and cultural studies, three works are of particular relevance to this thesis: Patrick Baudry's book *The Extreme Body [Le corps extrême]* (1991) and article 'The Logic of Extremity' ['La logique de l'extrême'] (1996), and Ardenne's book *Extreme [Extrême]* (2006). Other scholars have written on the extreme such as Julian Bétan in *Extreme!*

[Extrême!] (2012) and Helga Peskoller in *Extreme [Extrem]* (2001), but their ideas are less relevant to new extreme films as those of Baudry and Ardenne. Ardenne's ideas are especially useful here because his book is specifically interested in images of the extreme, their aesthetic construction and the relation of the spectator both to extreme acts and to images of such acts. Moreover, Ardenne touches upon some of the films which this thesis explores and includes chapters devoted to film violence and pornography, which are relevant to my arguments.

Central to the extreme for Ardenne are the unresolved tensions between the just inside and the just outside of a boundary. As noted in the introduction, Ardenne's key distinction is between the *extremus* and the *exter*. He argues that the non-transgressive 'superlative' is distinguished from the 'extreme' by the inclusion of the *exter* in the latter. The superlative spectacle contains only the *extremus*, the outer inside edge, whereas the extreme spectacle includes an *exter*, elements which are just beyond that boundary and have therefore transgressed it. Ardenne explains how these transgressive and non-transgressive elements can exist within a single artwork by using the metaphor of containing and overflowing (*border~ déborder*):

> The extreme image *overflows* [*déborde*] the human. It appears stronger than them and cannot therefore be 'acceptable'. If now we take into account its cathartic effect as well as the paradoxical calming effect that it brings, the extreme image […] ceases to be unacceptable and becomes 'acceptable', it appears by nature not to overflow [*déborder*] a person but rather to *contain* [*border*] them. (Ardenne 2006: 61)

Extremity includes both that which overflows, becomes exterior to, a boundary (here, that of the human), and that which is contained, remains interior to, this boundary. Ardenne makes clear here that the *exter* of an extreme image cannot be understood as separate from the *extremus*. The 'extreme spectacle' is distinct from the 'superlative spectacle': while the 'superlative

spectacle' is *extremus* or "*super* without the *exter*: the first stage of the extreme, its lower limit" (ibid.: 64), the 'extreme spectacle' is "a spectacle which is both *super* and *exter* at once" (ibid.: 95). Ardenne argues that the force of this spectacle is based "on its power to unsettle, on its capacity to violate intimacy, to break through our defences, to push us to into a sense of alarm, *really*. Submerged this time by emotion to the extent that, physically, we are forced into a response. In other words, weakened, worn down" (2006: 95–96). We are genuinely shaken, detached from our conventional modes of comprehending the world and forced into a reaction we do not understand; rather than reinforcing defences such as taboos, the extreme spectacle challenges them in ways that are violent towards the spectator[9] and leaves them physically and emotionally weaker, pondering the nature of the viewing experience.

Ardenne is not referring specifically to new extreme films here but his descriptions of the 'extreme spectacle' are pertinent to the experience of watching new extreme films. New extreme films really do 'rattle' us, they are unsettling and I often feel worn down after watching them; they are an ordeal, a feature-length challenge. After watching *In My Skin*, I was left literally shaking, *Antichrist* made me cry out and *Irreversible* has induced nausea and vomiting in spectators: rattling and unsettling indeed. I consider how an *exter* might become part of a film, and which narrative, aesthetic, affective and ethical strategies lead to this 'rattling' thus separating the experience of watching new extreme films from other films containing sex and violence, films which Ardenne might describe as 'superlative spectacles'.

Ardenne's emphasis on spectacle in these descriptions also ties in with important discussions in film theory about the relation between spectacle and narrative. Discussing early cinema, Tom Gunning describes the spectacle of the 'cinema of attractions' as possessing an energy

[9] Note the violence of Ardenne's language here: violate, break, push, submerge, shake, ruin.

which “moves outwards towards an acknowledged spectator” (1990: 59). It is precisely this potential for an embodied response to the cinematic spectacle which Laura Marks draws on in her theorising of the haptic image in ‘intercultural’ film and video. Citing Gunning, Marks relates the spectacles of the cinema of attractions to the haptic because of “an embodied response, in which the illusion that permits distanced identification with the action on-screen gives way to an immediate bodily response to the screen” (2000: 170). However, we must note that Gunning specifically contrasts spectacle’s outward energy with narrative’s “inward [energy] towards character-based situations” (1990: 59), even if his broader argument aims to position the cinema of attractions alongside rather than in opposition to narrative cinema. Given that in contrast both to Gunning’s ‘cinema of attractions’ and the performance artworks which predominate among Ardenne’s examples, new extreme films are (albeit unconventionally) narrative films, this discussion of spectacle needs nuancing to be particular to new extreme films.

In qualifying this idea of spectacle, Nanna Verhoeff’s reading of spectacle and narrative is useful. Verhoeff suggests that spectacle and narrative are too quickly separated, the former as an effect, the latter as a means of interpretation (2012: 575). She proposes that they both contain the potential for ‘heteropathic immersion’: “the ‘pathos’ of such an immersion is ‘hetero’ when viewing subjects go, as it were, out of themselves and make the leap to immerse themselves in the ‘other’ field visible on the screen” (ibid.: 575-6). Viewing spectacle and narrative as such means that they need not be seen as contradictory forces, one outward, one inward, but as able to produce complementary effects. In relation to ‘spectacle horror’, Adam Lowenstein has also put forward the suggestion that spectacle can be staged “without necessarily breaking ties with narrative development” (2011: 42) by drawing on Gunning’s reassessment of the ‘cinema of attractions’.

Altogether this demonstrates how Ardenne's idea of the 'extreme spectacle' is applicable both to contemporary film theory and new extreme films. Contemporary film theory, because Ardenne takes seriously the spectacle as an important philosophical element of an artwork. New extreme films, because Ardenne's account helps to understand their spectacular nature without forgetting that they are grounded in narrative. Given that the spectacular 'cinema of attractions' "bases itself on […] its ability to *show* something," (Gunning 1990: 57) there is also an emphasis on visibility both in theories of spectacle and in my understanding of new extreme films. Moreover, Verhoeff's discussion of spectacle and narrative begins with ruminations on the nature of time as felt during and between particular shots. Duration, the focus of chapter 4, is thus also present in discussions of spectacle.

While Ardenne explains the extreme spectacle by means of *extremus* and *exter*, by the exposure of the spectator to the inside and outside of a boundary, he is not the only scholar to link extremity to two sides of a boundary. Drawing on Bataille's notion of the extreme limit, Baudry posits an engagement with the inside and outside of a boundary within his understanding of the 'extreme body', the modern human body which he contends is extreme. Influenced by Bataille's contention that "at the elusive extreme limit of my being, I am already dead," (1997: 75) Baudry argues that the extreme body is in a state of ambiguity in that "the extreme sensation of being alive becomes confused with risk-taking, the risk of losing oneself at the end of an extreme existence" (1991: 53). The idea that death and life are intimately interwoven is not new. Aside from Bataille, Baudry also draws on Georg Simmel who posited that death "limits, that is, it gives form to life […] continually colouring all of life's contents" (2007: 74). However Baudry is not only reading the extreme body as one which brushes up against the possibility of death, but one which absorbs aspects of death into life. While the extreme body predominantly brushes up against the boundary of death, Baudry suggests in Bataillean terms that

it also marginally transgresses the 'extreme limit of being'. In a different context, that of high-altitude rock-climbing, Peskoller explains that "extreme people […] act […] on a boundary between order and disorder […] where both – order and disorder – transform into one another" (2001: 75). For Peskoller the boundary and the space either side are integral to the extreme experience and yet, as a rock climber, she could not let the experience plunge completely into disorder as it would likely lead to her death. The extreme experience can only therefore involve a small transgression into the space of disorder. This space close to the boundary, Ardenne calls the *exter*.

The Extreme Image

Importantly, Ardenne and Baudry are not only interested in extreme (or transgressive) acts but also in how the spectator interacts with images of these acts. In describing the experience of watching an extreme spectacle, Ardenne considers the power of art to affect those who look at it, while Baudry investigates the power of advertising. What interests them most is the violence directed at the spectator and not at the person undertaking the extreme act. Nonetheless, their analysis is predominantly focused on the extremity of the depicted acts rather than the extremity of the images themselves. Although the effects of such depictions on the spectator are almost always mediated through images because they predominantly discuss images, the formal and aesthetic elements of these images are left under-analysed in favour of an analysis of the depicted act *tout court*. Indeed Ardenne devotes much of his book to images *of the* extreme rather than images *which are themselves* extreme. Despite this focus on performance, Ardenne moves seamlessly between media and subject matter as well as beyond media altogether with little concern for the differences between ways of communicating extremity. When he discusses violent films such as *Crash* (Cronenberg, 1996), *The Passion of Christ* (Gibson, 2004)

or *Kill Bill* (Tarantino, 2003/2004) (2006: 147ff), zombie films (162ff) and disaster films (160ff) he does not linger on the aesthetic or temporal differences between them and is quick to compare them to punk-rock music (168ff), nineteenth-century theatre (155), violent video games (155), the grand guignol (154ff), vandalism (179ff) and painting (187ff). Baudry's images depict what he calls extreme situations – real events such as skiing, snowboarding and parachuting, and fictional ones such as people flying – while the images themselves remain formally or aesthetically conventional. What draws together their examples is the content, the depicted acts rather than how these acts are depicted or a specific sort of extreme image. This is where my analysis diverges from Ardenne's (and Baudry's) because I question what is extreme about new extreme films as aesthetic artefacts rather than focussing solely on the extremity of the depicted acts. I analyse what is experienced as the *extreme image* while Ardenne examines *images of the extreme*.

While Ardenne emphasises comparisons between the spectator of extremity and the actor of extremity – Serge III Oldenbourg's game of Russian roulette in *Solo pour la mort* for instance (2006: 11–15) – I examine the relationship between the film *images* and spectator, not just protagonist and spectator. Separating the extreme act from images of that act, Ardenne argues in relation to images of extremity, that "for want of the ability to live the extreme, the possibility remains of contemplating it, of deriving pleasure from it by allowing oneself a consolatory spectacle" (2006: 38). For Ardenne, images of the extreme enable the spectator to have a vicarious experience of the extreme act through a contemplation of its image: one gains a sense of the *exter* whilst remaining comfortingly consoled by the distance the image inevitably provides from the act itself. Helen Hester makes a similar point in her examination of non-sexual images described as 'pornographic'. She suggests that the word 'pornography' has become linked with "a desire to witness the human subject suffering or enjoying extreme physical

states, and, through the transgression attached to pursuing one's prurient interest in such scenes, to experience at least a ghost of this intensity for oneself" (2014: 122). It is not clear here whether the vicarious intensity is associated with the body experiencing the extreme state (most likely) or a possible diegetic witness experiencing the direct intensity of viewing, but in either case, Hester is suggesting that this 'pornographic' image functions as a replacement for being there in person. In contrast, in the 'extreme image', any identification with a character is only one constituent part of the film's extremity. This is not least because most of the spectatorial experiences I discuss arising from the films' formal and aesthetic qualities are unique to the film spectator and cannot be conflated with the experiences of any diegetic character. Nonetheless, the confluence of terms in this quotation from Hester with recurring ideas within this thesis – witness, extreme, transgression, experience, intensity – demonstrates that, while this difference between extreme images and images of extremity is important, these two types of images remain closely related. This difference between a viewer-film relationship (between a viewer and a *representation* of an act) and a viewer-act relationship (between a viewer and the act itself) does nonetheless mean that different ethical questions are posed to the spectator of new extreme films than with Ardenne's or Hester's oeuvres. A specific ethical relation between spectator and extreme image arises out of the unresolved tensions in new extreme films.

In distinguishing the extreme from images of the extreme, Ardenne suggests images are inherently less powerful in their impact on the spectator and therefore somehow inferior to the experience of being present at the act itself. Moreover, he contends that fictional images, in contrast to images of actually performed extreme acts or the 'realities' of documentary footage, even further distance us from the extreme act and have an even less productive impact on the spectator. Ardenne argues that the fictional image 'lies', denying the viewer a sense of their own voyeurism, of being degraded, of being truly beaten down:

> We, the spectator, know that the [fictional] image is deceitful. Looking at it, we are not therefore burdened with voyeurism as such, degraded by being subjected to dishonourable urges. […] *We linger on suffering*, but on an illusory suffering, which does not get under your skin. (Ardenne 2006: 168)

For Ardenne, the mediation of an image mollifies the radical potential of the extreme act and if the act being filmed is a fictional construction of an extreme act – i.e it is acted out – then the image can never have the sort of 'rattling', 'overflowing' effect that he attributes to viewing extreme acts in person, without the mediation of an image.

By contrast, we should not consider extreme images and extreme acts to be in a value relationship with each other: one is not better or worse than the other. The extreme image operates differently but not in an inferior way to the direct viewing of violence and sex. I counter claims about the fictional image's 'deceitful' nature by considering the realism communicated through visible depictions of sexual arousal. I also question Ardenne's claim that the suffering of fictional characters does not get under your skin, a suggestion which even the title of *In My Skin* counters. New extreme films are prime examples of how the spectator can be degraded and undermined by fictional spectacles. Rather than suggesting that lingering on suffering is always ethically problematic, as a voyeuristic enjoyment of another's pain, chapter 4 on duration investigates how, by taking the lingering to an extreme, the question of voyeuristic enjoyment is thrown back at the spectator rather than placed at their disposal. While I utilise many of Ardenne's ideas about extremity and its relation to the image, my thesis draws different conclusions, arguing for a challenging ethics of provocation in new extreme films, against his dismissal of the transformative power of images of the extreme.

Having said this, Ardenne's distinction between extreme acts and their images does raise one important criticism of extreme images that cannot be countered by my argument that extreme images provide a different but equally valid approach to extreme acts than direct images of, say, performance art. Ardenne suggests that aestheticisation – the rendering aesthetic, the linking of something to an appreciation of beauty (oed.com, 'aesthetic' §2, §4) – is a cathartic process which undermines extremity. Given that the *exter* is integral to a definition of extremity as the *unresolved* tension between what lies within and what lies beyond a boundary, reducing the *exter* by aestheticizing it would reduce that tension and render a spectacle no longer or less extreme. Ardenne emphasises how he perceives the aestheticisation of extremity through images to reduce the subversive to the conformist:

> Rendering the extreme image cathartic destroys extremity. […] With the consequence that the extreme image 'de-extremises', becomes a hidden tool of intimate and social domestication, managing to 'de-extremise' the desire for the extreme through the desire for its representation. Being confronted by the representation of the extreme can be understood as the loss of the extreme as soon as the extreme becomes reconstituted in the image and perceived by means of the image. (Ardenne 2006: 62)

Catharsis is precisely about cleansing ourselves, about finding relief from strong emotions and therefore about bringing what is beyond our control or our understanding into a safe space of comfort and comprehension. If there is an *exter*, then a cathartic resolution would bring the *exter* back inside the boundary: cartharsis is not necessarily about an *exter* but if the element to be purged is understood as an *exter*, a successful sense of catharsis will bring it into the norm, the controllable, the manageable, inside a boundary. Describing scenes of shocking violence or linguistic disorientation in the writing of William Faulkner, Hugo Ball and Alban Berg, Ardenne gives an example that is relevant for new extreme films because of the reference to

spectacles of violence and their position within a narrative structure: "this disaster, they 'aestheticise' it. They envelop it in a narrative which justifies it on each occasion. […] The surprise, the amazement, the fright felt when reading, produces respite" (ibid.: 97). Bringing together Ardenne's artistic focus and the above quotations, for Ardenne, the *image* of extremity is *always* 'de-extremised', removed of its extremity, by making the extreme *act* communicable and accessible.

For Ardenne, images of the extreme reduce and aestheticise direct perceptions of extremity and are therefore inferior cathartic reproductions of that extremity.[10] In contrast, my understanding of the extreme image *begins* with the idea that the image is extreme, because it operates according to the unresolved tension of *extremus* and *exter*. This extremity is based on the image and discourses around *representation* alone, not in contrast to a direct perception of an extreme act. Thus while I accept the difficulties posed by aestheticisation – what does it mean to make a spectacle out of violence? What does it mean if disturbing images are perceived as beautiful? – this criticism does not undermine my broader understanding of the extreme image. I now turn to how to situate the extreme image specifically in terms of new extreme films.

The New Extreme Image

I am suggesting that my conceptualisation of extremity according to *extremus* and *exter* is especially useful for considering new extreme films in ways that are not applicable to other films or selections of films that have been defined as extreme. This analysis is not attempting to

[10] This suspicion about the ethical status of representations of horror has a long history. See for instance Theodor Adorno's changing reflections on the subject. He stated in *Prisms* in 1955 that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (1983: 34), but reconsidered representation in his 1966 *Negative Dialectics* as the only way of capturing certain experiences because "perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems" (2007: 362).

define all extreme films, only the extremity that makes new extreme films extreme. This analysis does not therefore only pertain to the 'extreme' of new extreme films but also to the 'new' because many films are labelled as 'extreme' but many fewer films are best understood according to *extremus* and *exter*. Even if bringing 'new' together with 'extreme' has been accepted by a range of scholars under several variants (extreme/Extremism/Extremity/French Extremity), little has been said about this 'new'. Returning to the commonly acknowledged originator of this collocation, Quandt, we can see that apart from asking "what new or important truth does Dumont proffer?" (2011a: 24), Quandt makes no indication about what he considers to be new about his 'New French Extremity'. In a later reflection on this article, he suggests that:

> parking 'new' in front of any purported development in cinema, thematic, national or otherwise, is a venerable track, and by naming this development the 'New French Extremity', the article appeared to give form to an apparent but hitherto unspecified affinity. (Quandt 2011b: 210)

Nonetheless, this still provides no explicit indication of what Quandt is referring to when describing these films as 'new extreme' rather than just 'extreme'. His comparisons with what he terms "the authentic, liberating outrage" (2011a: 25) of past transgressions – linked explicitly to films such as *Weekend, Salò, À nos amours* (Pialat, 1983) and *The Mother and the Whore [La Maman et la putain]* (Eustache, 1975) – suggest that he sees this as a new wave or development of these older films, even as he seeks to disavow any real connection between the periods. Viewing new extreme cinema as a new wave chimes with Gordon Foxall's and Ronald Goldsmith's definition of newness which combines the trio of similarity, originality and 'recency' (2003: 323).[11] New extreme films are therefore recognisable as extreme films (similarity), do something that did not exist in previous or other extreme films (originality) and were

[11] As examples of similarity, they consider fashion as different iterations of existing models; of originality the phrase 'that's new to me'; and of 'recency' they give a 'new car'.

being released around the time when Quandt (and other thinkers) were theorising their effects ('recency'). As Foxall and Goldsmith point out however, "newness is often in the eye of the beholder" (ibid.); as such we must recognise an element of arbitrariness to assignations of newness. Another group of extreme films arising at the same time could not be described as 'new extreme' as it would lead to confusion even if they were as recent, original and similar to previous iterations of extreme cinema as the films studied here. We must be wary therefore of attributing too much theoretical weight to the designation of 'newness': instead of asking 'what is new about new extreme films?', we are better asking 'what is different about the extremity of 'new extreme' films that leads them to be defined separately from other extreme films?'. Answers to this latter question can be found in the fact that their extremity is best conceptualised according to the unresolved tensions between *extremus* and *exter*. Such tensions underpin the particular ethical outlook predicated on the provocation of the spectator in order to make them interpret acts, events and images differently.

The importance of the 'new' in 'new extreme' is shown in the many scholarly references to 'old' extreme films. Even if critics disagree about the intellectual heritage of many new extreme films (see Hawkins 2009), accounts of new extreme films regularly refer to films such as *Weekend* and *Salò* to provide points of comparison beyond the inclusion of graphic (sexualised) violence and explicit sex. One way of comparing these films would be to demonstrate the applicability to both new and 'old' extreme films of all three of Anthony Julius's defences of transgressive art. Julius notes that there are three main defences of a transgressive work of art: the 'estrangement' defence, the 'canonic' defence and the 'formalist' defence (2002: 26). The first defends an attempt to shock us into seeing the truth by destabilising interpretations of conventional images; the second highlights the connections to earlier now-canonical films; the third argues that the film's form is what matters and that concern about content is misplaced

(ibid.). All three of these defences are used for new and 'old' extreme films both by other scholars and in this thesis.[12] In itself this separates them both from many other films branded as extreme which are often described as exploitative, disturbingly immersive and tabloid titillation rather than serious artistic endeavour.[13] In the case of the 'canonic' defence new extreme films are explicitly linked to *Weekend* and *Salò* both in neutral or positive comparison (Goddard 2011; Kimber 2014; Birks 2015; Hobbs 2015) and negative condemnation (Quandt 2011a). Thus these 'old' extreme films certainly occupy a privileged space in discourses around new extreme films. It is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis to ask how relevant the ideas put forward here are for understanding previous iterations of extreme films. I am not suggesting that they would be inapplicable but simply that at this stage my claims about extremity are limited to contemporary cinema.

Despite my insistence on the extreme image, we must nonetheless examine the acts commonly depicted in new extreme films because they are central to the difficulty of the viewing experience. Subject matter is important firstly because it is relevant to all three subsequent chapters; secondly because it constitutes the most common terms in which new extreme films are discussed in the critical literature and therefore provides a good starting point for my discussions; and thirdly because the acts depicted are the primary way in which individual films participate in the genre of new extreme films. As mentioned in the introduction, Quandt provides a poetic list in his original article (2011a: 18). I take a less rhetorical avenue of description, considering

[12] On 'old' extreme films, see, for example, Hills (2014) on *Salò* and humanism or Borneman (2010) on *Weekend* and masculinity.

[13] On torture porn as exploitative see Tookey (2008, 2011) and Brown (2014: 51). On torture porn as immersive see accounts of *The Bunny Game* (Rehmeier, 2011) (Frisco Kid 2016) and of *Saw* (Aston and Walliss 2013: 10; Aldana-Reyes 2016: 67n9).

first the notion of censorship as the clearest manifestation of societal, moral and legal boundaries that new extreme films encounter and because it singles out the most provocative and confrontational images.

Censorship/classification boards act as moral arbiters, claiming to protect and inform the public in relation to potentially unsuitable images.[14] Most censorship boards are also entrusted with differentiating between carefully restricted pornography (often only available in licensed sex shops) and films which are sold without licence. Given that many new extreme films contain visible sexual acts, the decision not to categorise them as pornography is a critical commentary by censorship boards on the nature of these film-viewing experiences. It is important to note that discourses surrounding the *representation* of those acts are in question here; while the transgressive or taboo nature of an act in the world is relevant to images of that act and must be taken into account, those aspects of an act which lead to *its image* being taboo are of greatest interest here. I want to consider three broad subject categories that are linked to new extreme films and suggest how they fit with my understanding of extremity as involving unresolved tensions between *extremus* and *exter*. The first is the confluence of sex and violence either in the eroticisation of violent acts or in acts of sexual violence; the second is the frank visual depiction of menstruation and childbirth. The third category is the visibility of aroused genitals or penetration but I will not consider this third group here because visibility is examined at length in chapter 2.

[14] The Motion Picture Association of America issues ratings "with the intent to […] aid [parents] in determining the suitability of individual motion pictures for viewing by their children" (http://www.mpaa.org/film-ratings/ [accessed 28.09.2016]). The BBFC's mission is to "protect the public, and especially children, from content which might raise harm risks [and] empower the public, especially parents, to make informed viewing choices" (http://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-bbfc/our-mission [accessed 28.09.2016]).

The confluence of sex and violence within an act or event is the single most common extreme event across new extreme films with rape, sexual assault or sexualised violence being depicted in nineteen films discussed in relation to this thesis. As well as acts of male-on-female rape and sexual assault, we see male-on-male rape (*Twentynine Palms*), cannibalism during intercourse (*Trouble Every Day*), erotic self-mutilation (*In My Skin*), genital mutilation and bloody ejaculation (*Antichrist*), incestuous, fantasy, sexualised murder (*I Stand Alone*), murder with an erect penis, necrophilia and child rape (*A Serbian Film*) and genital surgery (*A Hole in my Heart*). In each of these cases, genitals become weapons of violence against another person, violence is inflicted on genitals, or perforating the skin is eroticised. We also see acts of consensual BDSM (*Irreversible* and *Romance*) and more coercive BDSM (*My Mother [Ma mère]* (Honoré, 2004)). Rape and sexual assault in films, however, are not a marker of extremity per se and are depicted regularly in mainstream films (Horeck 2004; Young 2009; Russell 2010; Barker 2011; Andrews 2012). Given their common depiction, this thesis investigates what is specific about the presentation of these rapes and sexual assaults, demonstrating that the visibility of penetration, the spectator's feeling of being physically close to the crime and positioning of the spectator as witness through the long duration of these depictions are important in making these scenes extreme. The addition either of a sexual element to violence, or of violence into the realm of the sexual is in itself felt to be provocative and already places such images into the territory of the *extremus*, the outer reaches of the acceptable. In most films, depictions of sexualised violence or violent sex are kept short, not shown in detail and most importantly, are explained and given a clear narrative meaning. This meaning may be the demonstration of a villain's heinous character, the reason for revenge, an explanation for a character's temperament, the posing of a legal or moral question or any other explanation integral to the narrative. In new extreme films, such explicatory frameworks are avoided and so these instances cannot be explained away; we experience the materiality of the attacks, their upsetting proximity, their

discomforting duration without being given clear reasons why they are shown in that way. This makes us more sensitive to the visceral qualities of the sex and violence but nonetheless, this bringing together of two visceral types of images, the sexual and the violent, into one sexually violent image connotes an image as *extremus*, at the edges of the conventionally acceptable. When this *extremus* content is then filmed using aesthetic techniques that push against and transgress the limits of visibility, proximity and/or duration, an *exter* is created: an image that pushes beyond those boundaries of conventional acceptability, can come into existence. The *extremus* and *exter* of an image are therefore closely related to the *extremus* and *exter* of the key concepts of visibility and obscurity, proximity and distance, duration and brevity.

The idea of menstruation as a perennial taboo is highlighted in scholarly articles (Houppert 2000; Kim and Stein 2009; Rosewarne 2012) and in the popular press (George 2012; Betts 2013; Anon. 2015). Although it has been shown, for example, in India that menstruation and the menstruating woman herself remain taboo, with menstruating girls and women told not to touch fruit for fear of it going rotten, and forbidden from entering holy sites (George 2012; Jha 2014; Madhok 2014), critics and scholars of Western views on menstruation focus on its taboo in representation and discussion. Several of the scholars cited above highlight the conspicuous absence of blood in tampon and sanitary towel adverts, blood being replaced by a transparent blue liquid as though the intimation of blood should be hidden. Susan Kim and Elissa Stein describe menstruation as "hidden in a figurative box (scented, of course), stuffed deep inside the great medicine cabinet of American culture: out of sight and unmentioned," (2009: ix) while Hannah Betts describes the uncomfortable reaction she received when mentioning her period in public, asking: "in an age in which no topic appears prohibited, menstruation remains utterly beyond the pale. […] why are periods still such a taboo, still so unspeakable, even in Western societies, even among females?" (2013). At the same time as being so 'unspeakable' and so

'out of sight', the market for feminine hygiene products is worth vast amounts and adverts appear regularly on television, demonstrating that menstruation is spoken about and shown in public. Thus the frank discussion or brazen depiction of menstruation as we see in films such as *Anatomy of Hell* or *Baise-moi* is already unusual and taboo (shown by Bett's interlocutors' disgust at the topic). When this is eroticised this pushes the image to the limits of what is normally tolerated, into the *extremus*: as Ellen Scott notes, even television series with sexually explicit themes find the idea of period sex too challenging for many audiences (2017). We see menstrual blood dripping from an erect penis in *Anatomy of Hell*, during which the man also drinks menstrual blood while naked; and in *Baise-moi*, Manu exclaims how aroused she is when menstruating. When these are shot in long close-ups or shown in clear and unambiguously visible detail – pushed to the limits of visibility and proximity – this pushes these images into an *exter*.

This might sound odd given that menstruation and childbirth are intricately tied up with reproduction and sex, but I contend that the introduction of sex or eroticisation into depictions of childbirth also pushes them to an *extremus* in new extreme films, specifically *Romance*. Many films show natural births but they avoid depictions of the baby's exit from the vagina, showing only the newly wrapped, dry baby with cord cut and placenta unacknowledged. It is already a shocking depiction of birth in a fiction film to show details of the material aspects of birth as in *Children of Men* (Cuarón, 2006), in which we see amniotic fluid and the baby's exit or in *Sense8* (The Wachowskis, 2015-17) in which we see detailed images of childbirth. Nonetheless, the depiction itself of childbirth is still commonly accepted especially within educational contexts with huge numbers of videos available online and depictions of childbirth shown in school biology classes.

In *Romance*, however, images of labouring women are shown together with their vaginas being penetrated by masturbating men and a woman describes the sexual pleasure she gains from her prenatal examinations. As noted above, bringing the erotic together with female reproduction pushes at the limits of societal tolerance. Indeed Kathryn Rabuzzi suggests it pushes at the limits of Western imagination: "so strongly does Western culture try to separate eroticism and motherhood that few of us consider pregnancy and childbirth erotic at all" (1994: 116). These images are shown in great detail and in close-ups, often with a haptic effect, and as such are then pushed beyond conventional limits and into an *exter*. As with the eroticisation of violence, images depicting the eroticisation of menstruation or childbirth can, in their content, point towards extremity. While the following chapters will explore how new extreme films are extreme according to the unresolved tensions of *extremus* and *exter*, one can see that some of the subject matter can already be understood as *extremus*. Images already at the outer edges of acceptability are pushed beyond the boundaries of acceptability, norms, and morals into an *exter* by aesthetic techniques which place the images at the limits of visibility and obscurity, proximity and distance, duration and brevity. In addition the avoidance of explicatory narrative frameworks resists a re-incorporation of these images into a known, conventional space of mainstream understanding. Having now provided a detailed description of what I understand extremity to mean in new extreme films, I turn to their relation to ethics.

Film and Ethics

The ensuing chapters demonstrate and analyse how individual new extreme films can be understood according to the definition of extremity outlined above and how each film's particular images encourage us to look anew at certain acts and events. Here I lay out the concepts which

underpin the ethical framework of new extreme films. New extreme films are ultimately inseparable from a provocative ethics of spectatorship.

I identify the experience of watching a new extreme film as an encounter which does not prescribe behaviour but encourages the spectator to rethink their relation to the film. I characterise the films as ethical rather than moral, immoral or amoral and suggest that images are best critiqued by images because it is our manner of looking, not the choice of whether to look, that is being challenged. Finally, I argue that one of the specificities of new extreme films is their resistance to reabsorption within a liberal progressive political ideology: even when we understand the films' extremity as part of a challenging provocative ethics, there remain conservative and retrogressive tendencies incompatible with liberal progressivism. The films play with other categorisations such as progressive, politically correct and liberal, asking questions about the nature of political and ethical filmmaking and about who watches such films. This thesis considers the extent to which these retrogressive tendencies are a further form of progressively minded provocation or a retrogressive repeating of bigotry.

Downing and Saxton consider film and ethics to come together in a process of self-questioning that occurs in the encounter with a visual artwork (2010: 1–3). While they engage with numerous ethical frameworks, most of the theorists and methodologies they explore are indebted to Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Lacan or Foucault, either by developing upon their work (Derrida on Levinas, Žižek on Lacan) or in positioning themselves against it (Badiou against Levinas). This means that central terms such as the Other (Levinas), the Real (Lacan), models of power, and ideas such as desire, sexuality and freedom (Foucault) recur in many of Downing's and Saxton's discussions of film and ethics. Downing and Saxton note that they do not prioritise

one theorist over another, nor encourage a totalising model of ethics: "it is not a first philosophy, a master-narrative or a meta-paradigm which seeks to exceed other critical approaches or to reduce all reflection on cinema to ethical concerns" (2010: 11). Similarly, I do not approach new extreme films from an ethical perspective because of a belief that ethics is the only way to approach film but because I think that this is how the films present themselves; the unpleasant nature of the viewing experience is one that inherently poses ethical questions about spectatorship.[15] It is notable that many scholarly accounts of new extreme films explicitly link them with some form of ethical thought (see Downing 2004, 2006; Matthews 2011; Grønstad 2012; Brown 2013; Scott 2014). I put the films in dialogue with different ethical frameworks in order both to better understand the films and to assert pressure on those frameworks. Just as Grønstad (2012) and Nikolaj Lübecker (2015) suggest that their corpuses of 'unwatchable' and 'feel-bad' films, respectively, provide productive ways of considering the nature of art, new extreme films add to and challenge our understandings of extremity, transgression, limits and genre.

One important and influential conceptualisation of ethics, which contains some fundamentals of how I see new extreme films as operating, is Sarah Cooper's reading of Levinas and film (2006). Cooper's reading of certain French documentary films and my reading of new extreme films overlap in important ways: we both consider ethics as an encounter, as destabilising, as profoundly challenging. Cooper views the experience of watching films as an encounter from which ethics arises: "[the] encounter conditions the possibility for an ethical response […] in fact, such an ethics is produced through the encounter, rather than pre-existing it" (2006: 22–23). Ethics is not inherent to the images but is formed and established through the spectator's interactions with the image. This is fundamental to how I conceive of the ethics of new extreme films because the process of watching a film, how our feelings and thoughts develop whilst

[15] Note a similar argument about Michael Haneke in Wheatley (2009).

viewing a film, is at the heart of the ethical encounter with a new extreme film. Stable viewing positions or stable centres of knowledge are also undermined in Cooper's reading:

> There is no stable position of knowledge, comprehension, vision, perception or understanding generated here; each of these activities is vulnerable to disruption, and this questions the harmonious way in which one might otherwise conceive of viewing relations and challenges the certainties of the viewing subject. (Cooper 2006: 23)

The certainty of the viewing subject is something which new extreme films explicitly strive against, with their viscerally challenging, morally controversial and affectively disorienting imagery.[16]

Finally, this sense of a challenging encounter which the spectator cannot escape also chimes with the Levinasian idea of alterity as radically separate from the 'Same':[17]

> it is important to register that a Levinasian-inspired ethics of vision is not one of sweetness and light, and that the ethical is a form of permanent, deep questioning that never allows the subject to settle. Because the ethical leaves its mark on the perceiving subject without the subject's being able to assimilate what it encounters, Levinasian ethics brings to this study […] the perhaps unsettling acknowledgement that others can never be fully comprehended within the space or times of the cinematic encounter. (Cooper 2006: 24)

Even as we might agree with the broad aims of the films, they nonetheless continue to challenge us and our ability to continue watching; they present a deep questioning which makes it difficult

[16] The techniques Cooper observes to achieve this in her documentary corpus are nonetheless different from those discussed here.

[17] For Levinas, "to think in terms of *opposition* would be to conceive of self and Other as two sides of a coin, defined in relation to one another and therefore belonging to the same totality: 'If the Same were to establish its identity by simple *opposition to the Other*, it would already be part of a totality encompassing the Same and the Other' [*Totality and Infinity*]. So Levinas describes the self as neither different to nor opposed to the Other, but separate from it" (Davis 1996: 42).

to settle or find a stable position from which to judge. They are often not films we should be able to watch easily because if they were rendered pleasant by repeat viewings, it would undermine their ethical power. Indeed certain respondents in audience research suggested that repeat viewing of *Irreversible* is "only justifiable if it continues to be as hurtful as the first viewing," (Barker and others 2007: 8) a comment which affirms Cooper's description of Levinasian film ethics as a 'permanent questioning'. Like the Levinasian ethical relation in which we must always be open to the Other without ever expecting anything in return,[18] in watching new extreme films we must also accept that "the ethical position itself is set up as extremely uncomfortable even though it is registered as discomfort with positive, uplifting benefits" (Cooper 2006: 23). Discomfort is integral to the viewing experience of new extreme films and in their uncomfortable challenge to the spectator they can also not be described as 'sweetness and light'. Moreover, in contrast to the readings of Ardenne and Hester, who link the pleasure of viewing extremity to a vicarious identification with the protagonist (Ardenne 2006: 38; Hester 2014: 122), new extreme films do not suggest that we can 'know' the character or their situation, acknowledging that they "can never be fully comprehended" (Cooper 2006: 24), a point to which I return in a moment.

Cooper's Levinasian idea of an 'ethical encounter' emerges in Michele Aaron's work on film spectatorship and her theorisation of viewing pleasure as inherently masochistic. Writing about images of suffering, Aaron argues that:

> film spectatorship – inherently contractual and hooked on the 'real' or imagined suffering of others – does not just appeal to ethical thought but in some ways is the ethical encounter. What I mean by this is that spectatorship depends upon our intersubjective alignment with the prospective suffering of others. Indeed, spectatorship, if it is nothing else, is

[18] "Morality is not moral if it is maintained [only because] […] I expect to get something in return" (Davis 1996: 51).

> intersubjective. […] Spectatorship is not ethically interesting but intrinsically ethical. (Aaron 2007: 112)

Aaron not only sees ethics as an encounter and a process, but in conceptualising film spectatorship as an intersubjective encounter, she positions spectatorship and ethics as correlative. The idea that film spectatorship inherently speaks to questions of ethics is shared by this thesis, given the importance that questions about the viewer and the viewing experience have in the ethics of new extreme films. This is just a first step to considering the precise 'ethical encounter' that is involved in viewing new extreme films. Aaron's work is also important because of how she conceptualises ethics in comparison to morality: much like Downing and Saxton (who also draw on Aaron's work), Aaron separates ethical process from moral edict, arguing that the distinction between ethics and morals:

> becomes fundamental here for within it lies the all-important prioritisation of (ethical) recognition, realisation, reflection – the stuff of agency – over (moral) prescription, proclamation and punishment – the stuff of ideology. In other words, ethics, according to Dogme [95], to countless philosophers, to me, is all about thinking through one's relationship to morality rather than just adhering to it. (Aaron 2007: 108)

This distinction between agency and ideology, between a spectator thinking through their relationship to a film's images, and dominant ideologies that conventionally structure how we look at those images, is at the heart of the ethics of new extreme films. Their ethical nature resides in the demand to rethink the ideological structures that govern how we conventionally look at images of sex and violence.

Nonetheless, I disagree with Aaron on one point and indeed, in some ways, this thesis is a cogitation on how this following statement can be rethought. Aaron declares that being moved

– emotionally, physically, involuntarily – is anathema to a processual, committed and reflective ethics which foregrounds recognition and responsibility: "being moved, I want to argue, marks the experience as moral but not ethical: involuntary emotion is the opposite of reflection and implication" (2007: 116). Predicated on Sontag's rebuke of sympathy as an ethically empty response (2003: 91–92), Aaron argues that the emotional responses of a viewer of a film like *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998) are ethically unproductive (2007: 116). Quoting Franco Moretti's description of tears at sad film scenes as "a catharsis that implies a definite disavowal of the tragic," (ibid.) Aaron presents a similar criticism of certain images of suffering as Ardenne does of the (aestheticized) image of extremity. Catharsis removes the unpleasant and uncontrollable *exter* of a painful experience and renders it comfortingly within known boundaries, or as Aaron sees it, allows us to feel that we have done 'our bit' and thus are no longer responsible for whatever is in the image (ibid.). Although they come at the issue from different angles, in both Ardenne's and Aaron's accounts, the spectator's compulsion to act is destroyed by this cathartic reincorporation of pain into the known.

It is important to note this aspect of Aaron's conceptualisation of ethics because it is one I contend new extreme films specifically counter. Being moved, feeling emotion, feeling bodily reactions to a film need not always be cathartic, be based on sympathy nor give us the feeling of having done 'our bit'. While I agree with much of Aaron's analysis, an analysis of new extreme films allows for a nuancing of her claims as to the ethical potential of being moved by a film. *Irreversible*'s opening torrent of violence is completely unexplained at the time, the supposedly heroic vengeful ambitions of the murderous protagonist unknown until much later. The protagonist of *In My Skin* gains sexual satisfaction at cutting her body open rather than the pitying self-rebuking we can sympathise with in the self-harm of *Secretary* (Shainberg, 2002).

Involuntary emotional and corporeal reactions need not be cathartic and self-exculpatory but can be an important aspect of a film which engenders critical thinking.

New Extreme Films and Ethics

I now turn to a specific consideration of the ethics of new extreme films and to theorists whose names will recur throughout this thesis. These scholars come especially, although not exclusively, from backgrounds in feminist film theory, disability studies and war studies. This might sound surprising given that only some of the films in my corpus espouse a feminist perspective and there is no concerted emphasis on either disability or war. However, I draw on these scholars because their theories of a progressive, productive ethics of visual media resound with how new extreme films operate. These theorists echo new extreme films' faith in images themselves as a means to destabilise, challenge and change how we look: for instance, in new extreme films, showing unobstructed what is normally hidden (genitals, perforation, menstruation) is seen as the central way of reassessing representations of genitalia, self-harm and female sexuality. New extreme films and these theorists also align in their insistence on ethics as a process which requires continual reassessment and constant retroactive consideration. Scenes in these films are frequently long and slow, calling on the spectator to consider images at length, while narratives are sparse and elliptical, leaving many unanswered questions to reflect upon. The films' emphasis on the corporeal reactions of the spectator also emphasises the processual nature of ethics. Ethics cannot be reduced down to a particular image or set of words but is about the process of the spectator reacting, as much as the image itself. Finally, these theorists and new extreme films see identification as powerful and important, but note that the temptation to reduce subjects to what Levinas calls the 'Same', or to essentialise them, must be resisted. New extreme films rarely offer psychological insights into their characters, mostly position the

viewer as accompanying the characters or witnessing diegetic events rather than experiencing them from the characters' perspective, and focus on proximity to these characters rather than trying to 'know' them, to understand 'who they are'. These characteristics are not in themselves extreme, nor indeed specific to new extreme films, but this is the ethical consequence of engaging with the images of new extreme films. It is the engagement with these forms of ethics through an evocation of extremity as the unresolved tension between *extremus* and *exter* that is specific to new extreme films. While the objects of these theorists' studies – feminist film, war, disability – are different from those of new extreme films, the methodology which these theorists wish to see employed and the ethical consequences that they would like to see arising, manifest themselves in the viewer's ethical encounter with new extreme films.

There is a certain tendency in film and photography studies, exemplified by Sontag's remarks in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), to be suspicious of claims about the political or ethical potential of images of suffering. Sontag notes about war photography, "it seems exploitative to look at harrowing images of other people's pain in an art gallery," (2003: 107) and although she refers to photographs of real-life suffering rather than films of performed suffering, the suspicion of aesthetics which underpins her argument is relevant far beyond her chosen art form. Many scholars critique this essentially anti-aesthetic position – most explicitly Judith Butler (2010) – by arguing that we need to reconfigure or re-educate rather than reject the gaze. Long before Sontag's essay and Butler's critique, Silverman argued that visual texts in particular, in contradistinction to nonvisual texts, "have the power to re-educate the look," (1996: 5) precisely because visual texts are predicated on the gaze itself. Teresa de Lauretis also expounds a consideration of the image in this way, writing of the power of feminist cinema to "construct another (object of) vision" and to build new "conditions of visibility" (1984: 68). Looking, especially when challenging or uncomfortable, can be a way of interrogating how we

look, as well as challenging the ideological assumptions and power structures that govern spectatorship. Showing something does not foster a critique *per se*, but for these scholars it enables us to enter into discussions about what is shown. By contrast, entirely rejecting images closes off discussion of images; showing is of paramount importance, images are the primary condition of a fight to change images.

In her discussion of war images, Kozol reminds us of the importance of considering the aesthetics as much as the content of images, that is, how the images are constructed as much as the people, acts or events which they depict. Quoting Jay Prosser, Kozol argues that: "'style and form and the idea of the beautiful and what appeals to our eye are not add-ons. In the image they are a way of understanding and conveying atrocity.' Indeed aesthetics matter enormously to the politics of visual witnessing" (2014: 20). This concern for the formal construction of images is reflected in my close examination of style and aesthetics, and in my point about extremity that we must closely question *how* and not just *if* boundaries are transgressed. Moreover, the relation between aesthetics and the politics of witnessing is examined closely in chapter 4 in an examination of the witnessing of rape and sexual assault.

In order to alter how we look, it is also useful to destabilise and render problematic those images and those ways of looking that have heretofore been accepted. In her book on the ethics of viewing disability, Kuppers writes of a desire for "productive destabilisations […] not a general vibrational destabilisation of everything, but a political rhetoric" (2007: 2). Rather than a revolutionary desire to overturn viewing cultures, Kuppers points towards specific destabilisations of how we look at and interpret subjects and acts. In new extreme films this means, for instance, destabilising phallocentric constructions of the female body and female sexuality (*Baise-moi, Anatomy of Hell*), Western-centric constructions of Eastern Europe (*A New Life*),

the assumption of pleasure as the guiding principle of pornography (*A Hole in my Heart, A Serbian Film*) and conventional idealisations of sexual bodies (*Battle in Heaven, Taxidermia*). Especially through proximate and visible imagery, our encounter with new extreme films destabilises established relations between reality and fiction, screen and spectator, film and world, in order to productively reconsider particular acts and their representation. In this way of understanding film, extreme images are able to undermine conventional ways of looking at images, with modes of spectatorship being considered as the point of entry into the ethics and politics of the viewed and viewing subjects.

Using different terminology but evoking the same self-critical analysis, Silverman describes the need to retroactively alter on a conscious level our perceptual or instinctive understanding of events by looking a second time or by recalling the images and our reactions afterwards: "although we cannot control what happens to a perception before we become aware of it, we can retroactively revise the value which it assumes for us at a conscious level" (1996: 3). New extreme films assail us affectively, viscerally, in relation to controversial or challenging material, which means we are repeatedly encountering our bodily perceptions of images – our instinctive reactions to them – which we can only intellectualise *ex post facto*. What does it mean for me to have been disgusted/shocked/aroused/upset/excited by that image? It is this reflective engagement with our involuntary reactions, in addition to our voluntary reactions to images, which positions the encounter as ethical rather than moral. This is a specific kind of continual process encouraged by new extreme films: they espouse an ethics of slow reassessment and reappraisal as we rethink the images with which we have been confronted.

At the same time, certain forms of identification are necessary to maintain this ethical perspective. Any idea that certain depictions make us feel as though we are being beaten/raped/fucked

is, for instance, particularly problematic. While I argue that new extreme films encourage us to see ourselves as witness to events, or proximate to the characters rather than straightforwardly identifying with them, there is sometimes a temptation to see the spectator as being subjected to the same violence as the protagonists. Critics of *Irreversible* have for instance described the experience as one in which the spectator is themselves "raped" (Wilson 2012: n.p.) or "becomes one with Pierre's victim" (Nicodemo 2012: 38); while the experience of watching *Irreversible* is undoubtedly challenging, the assaults on the characters are of a fundamentally different order to those on the spectator. Far from suggesting we can 'know' the experience of being raped or beaten to death, we are invited into an idea of the character's physical suffering while being challenged in our position as witness. Kuppers, whose book considers how technologies articulate the (un)knowability of another's body writes about the importance of identification without the other becoming 'fully knowable,' (2007: 2) as she considers how we might share experiences without being seduced "into the fantasy of full identification, the idea that we 'know' what her experience is, or even that she knows what it is" (ibid.). This is a reformulation of Levinas's concern about how the radical alterity of the Other can be reassimilated into the Same while repeating Cooper's conception of a Levinasian ethical encounter in which we "acknowledge[] that others can never be fully comprehended" (2006: 24). We do gain information about the suffering of the characters in *Irreversible*, but we must not conclude that we are 'transposed into their shoes' (Nicodemo 2012: 38) as this reduces the individuality, uniqueness and otherness of their experience. Not only is this form of identification problematic in seeking to control the 'knowledge' of the event, but it also diminishes the power of what new extreme films are actually doing. Demonstrating that rape and murder are awful is a rather banal act – do we need to watch a film to know this? – but exposing the problematic ideological structures that govern how we look at images of rape and alerting us to our own complicity in these images is a powerful political act.

Silverman succinctly summarises a more productive approach, one in agreement with Kuppers' and Cooper's ideas about film ethics and which I contend new extreme films aspire to:

> it is not enough that we be textually enabled to identify with what is culturally disprized. It is crucial that this identification conform to an externalising rather than an internalising logic – that we identify excorporatively rather than incorporatively, and, thereby, respect the otherness of the newly illuminated bodies. It is equally vital that we be brought to a conscious knowledge that we have been the agents of that illumination so that the newly created ideal does not congeal into a tyrannizing essence. (Silverman 1996: 2)

Not only must we avoid internalising this identification but we must be made aware of the role we have played in any change as well as our role in the initial construction of the image. This is achieved in new extreme films through unpleasant and unusual bodily sensations which we do not incorporate into ourselves. That we are also made aware of our position as spectator and, in some cases, witness, highlights our role in the depicted acts. While we must allow the person's suffering or pleasure to remain othered and their own, we must take responsibility for how our thinking changes so that the thoughts are ours and not an external imposition. It must be a process of ethics not morality. Otherwise we might see depictions as truthful or essential and not contingent on our own subjective and contextual experience. Rather than encouraging us to conceive of what we have just watched as having opened up onto 'truth' or 'essence', an image should promote the opening up of alternative perspectives, the pluralistic expansion of how we can look at the world. I argue that some new extreme films – notably *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart* – approach absolutist notions of essence and that this is problematic. I also suggest that certain scholars who view films as revealing 'truths', should consider the film as multiple ways of approaching an image or an issue instead. Rather than a singular 'truth', there are numerous ways of viewing the perforation of *Trouble Every Day* and the penetration of

Romance, a pluralism which the films themselves posit as an alternative to the hegemonic interpretations that normally explain the images. I am therefore keenly aware of the dangers of thinking about 'essences' and 'truths' when demonstrating the evocation of a provocative encounter with new extreme films.

We must also not forget that these films are provocative on many levels, not limited to visceral or aesthetic provocations. It is hard to understand the necessity of the homophobia in *Irreversible*, the aggressive heteronormativity in *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*, the sexism in *9 Songs*, *A New Life* and *Antichrist*, the racism in *I Stand Alone*. As I argue in chapter 4, the homophobia of *Irreversible* pervades the structure of the film far beyond the provocative suggestion that the rapist is homosexual. Similarly, I argue in chapter 2 that the narrative structure and aesthetic choices in *9 Songs* mean that the idea of active men looking at women-objects infiltrates the whole film far beyond the provocative inclusion of porn-like sex noises in the first film to feature visible male ejaculation and not be classified as pornography in the UK. We should not allow a critical investment in the productive, progressive potential of extremity blind us to its concomitant reactionary potential. While this thesis takes an open-minded view on new extreme films and their ethical framework, it does not baulk from criticising the films when appropriate. I contend, with Douglas Keesey, that these problematic aspects of these films cannot and must not be ignored or 'interpreted away' in order to 'save the films for political correctness' (2010: 101). We should accept these digressions from political correctness as part of the films' project, instead of viewing them as aberrations or misreadings of otherwise complex manifestations of progressive politics, instead of trying to recoup these films into a progressive liberal agenda. Indeed I will suggest that these areas of unclarity about a film's political agenda or genre participation can also be understood according to *extremus* and *exter* and are integral to why new extreme films are understood as extreme.

General methodological notes

This thesis examines the similarities between a selection of diverse films and suggests that together they present a challenging ethical program. I do not declare new extreme films to be a movement, nonetheless, the ethical and political import of new extreme films becomes clearer and more pertinent when we take note of how they operate collectively. Tim Palmer rightly notes that new extreme films are "connected more loosely [than a movement], through commonalities of content and technique," (2011: 57) and these commonalities are precisely the locus of what I analyse as new extreme films' collective ethical and political outlook, rather than examining a political or philosophical viewpoint shared by the filmmakers. It is only in comparing and contrasting the films and ethical theories, putting their extreme images together, as well as separating them, that we can see the full power and import of looking at extremity and ethics together. I take this cue from Grønstad and Nick Davis who both, in their explorations of corpuses which overlap significantly with my own, speak of the analytical productiveness of viewing the films together, regardless of their divergent production histories or authorial intentions.[19] Grønstad contends that "the sum of the films considered below is greater than any one film; taken together these works form a particular moral and aesthetic configuration that may not be fully present in each individual instance" (2011: 5). Similarly emphasising the benefits of collective and individual analysis, Davis argues that:

> all of these films are more productive and more articulate in conjunction than as discrete entities, not least because they prove the pliability and polyvocality of sexual images whose very "reality" sometimes codes as one-dimensionally transgressive, empty beyond shock value. (Davis 2008: 633)

[19] Grønstad examines 'unwatchable' films; Davis is interested in visible sex, especially in a queer context.

If the power of new extreme films derives from their ability to make us look differently, to perceive the world in multiple alternative ways, assessing the plurality of visions and identifying the 'polyvocality' that arises from ostensibly divergent viewpoints continues the ethical ambitions the films themselves have. Indeed the broad outlook of new extreme films is to challenge and undermine absolutist and monolithic understandings of the world, and so to view these films as proclaiming one particular way of approaching the world would be to ironically reconstitute the absolutes that the films seek to dismantle. It is in examining a larger corpus of films that the plurality of visions and the multiple political and ethical subjects that new extreme films engage with, become most clear.

This sense of bringing together different critical perspectives without conflating them but seeking to find their productive conversations, disagreements and insights will also be brought to bear on my film-theoretical approach to new extreme films. I take my lead from Robert Sinnerbrink's and Lübecker's comments about what they see as unhelpful separations between socio-political and aesthetic readings of films by Michael Haneke and Claire Denis. Lübecker argues that an exploration of aesthetic questions in *I Can't Sleep* (Denis, 1994) "does not necessarily exclude more socio-political debates and it may even be argued that the focus on performativity (for example) allows a new take on socio-political questions" (2007: 18). Similarly, Sinnerbrink contends that such separations invoke "a false dichotomy: the socio-cultural critique in Haneke's films is dependent upon the cinematic critique, while the cinematic critique is itself a performative form of socio-cultural critique" (2011: 122). They both argue that whilst many influential commentators show an awareness of the opposite perspective from their own – Wheatley (2009) on Haneke and Beugnet (2004) on Denis, for instance – they "will in the end prioritise either the predominantly socio-political or the more poetico-performative ap-

proach" (Lübecker 2007: 19). Indeed Wheatley specifically rejects an engagement with explicitly political issues in her examination of ethics and spectatorship in Haneke: "socio-political readings of the film [*Hidden*] need not be dwelled upon; as we have seen, Haneke's films are always at heart concerned with revealing something not about society, but about the spectator's relationship to the screen" (2009: 156).

My own approach stems from the contention that the affective aspects of new extreme films (what Lübecker might call 'poetico-performative') are at the heart of new extreme films' engagement with socio-political and ethical issues. The linking of affect, ethics and politics in new extreme films is integral to understanding their approach to film, and that to separate out any issue is to misunderstand how the films operate. The ethical challenge to how we look and to our existence as spectator (which Wheatley argues Haneke is predominantly interested in) is linked to specific political contexts – such as images of violence or images of women – as well as being a reflection on spectatorship more generally; moreover this ethics is predicated on the corporeal reactions of the spectator. Affect, ethics and politics are intricately interwoven in the experience of watching new extreme films.

Having introduced the concept of extremity and explained my theoretical understanding of the ethical framework of new extreme films, the next chapter makes the transition into a discussion of the films themselves. The chapter focuses on visibility, beginning a contemplation on new extreme films which will proceed via an exploration of proximity to an investigation of duration, before concluding with remarks on the nature of transgression and genre in light of my analyses. Analysing new extreme films' images and the experience of watching them, I examine specific examples of *extremus* and *exter* and the unresolved tensions between these. I show how the limits of visibility and obscurity, proximity and distance, duration and brevity are

pushed up against and transgressed, as well as demonstrating how these concepts can be linked theoretically to extremity and the ethical encounter I identify in new extreme films. This shows how the concept of extremity is woven deep into the fabric of new extreme films in ways that encourage us to rethink notions of limits and transgressions.

Chapter 2 – Visibility

The introduction and first chapter have already sketched out some of the reasons why visibility is important in the context of new extreme films. Firstly, ‘explicit sex’, which foregrounds the visibility of aroused genitals and penetrative sex acts, and ‘graphic violence’, which foregrounds the visibility of the violent act, the wounds and the blood, are common shorthands used to describe the content of new extreme films. Secondly, all films participating in the new extreme film genre contain either eroticised violence or visible sex, the latter focussing especially on visibility. Thirdly, censorship boards place great emphasis on the visibility of sex and violence in categorising films. Fourthly, the ethical framework outlined in chapter 1 is predicated on images being visible, rather than censored or avoided, in order to alter our relation to images. Fifthly, many new extreme films can be said to make invisible, non-physical violences visible through depictions of physical violence. Finally, how people, objects and acts are made visible in new extreme films can best be understood by thinking about how the ensuing images are *extremus*, conventional and uncontentious as well as transgressive, *exter* and provocative.

This chapter explores these aspects of visibility and the links between visibility and authenticity, realism, documentary, confrontation, disgust and exaggeration. Importantly, all my references here to visibility include moments when people, objects and acts are *not* visible. All references to visibility and/or obscurity are therefore always about *how visible* and about *the exact form of the visibility or obscurity.*

I have argued that new extreme films are characterised by elements at the outer edge of a boundary (*extremus*) and elements transgressing that boundary but not significantly (*exter*). I contrasted this with the maximalist spectacle of pornography or hardcore horror, where images are as sexual/violent/arousing/pleasurable/gory/visible/proximate/uninterrupted as possible (see Ardenne 2006: 211–12). Visibility in new extreme films can also be understood in this way. These films contain images which make people, acts and objects visible in ways that push beyond certain boundaries (of common taste, moral propriety, or filmic conventions) into the realm of the *exter*, but most of the films' images remain within these boundaries. *Irreversible* shows a rape in gruelling duration, a single take shows the rapist's detumescent penis, yet it refrains from any close-ups of the rape and there are no penetration shots. In *Trouble Every Day*, the protagonist devours a woman's genitals whilst performing cunnilingus: an image of this is not, however, shown, even though we have witnessed his visible ejaculation earlier on in the film.[20] Contrasting these scenes to the zombie pornography film *Re-penetrator* which also features sexualised cannibalism and bloody cunnilingus, we see that the sexual acts between a male doctor and female zombie in *Re-penetrator* are filmed in great detail and last for most of the film (there are no other narrative elements). When the zombie orgasms, the man is covered in blood, shown in close-up. When the doctor is eaten in the final scene, we see his intestines ripped out, limbs thrown across the room, and his now-flaccid penis being beaten

[20] As McMahon comments, the film "refus[es] to display the horror of the event up close […] It is precisely in its engagement with the abyssal real of this kiss that the film finds itself eschewing representation" (2012: 133–34).

violently. *Re-penetrator* attempts to make every sexual and violent act maximally visible: we see all the acts and in close-up detail. In contrast, in *Trouble Every Day*'s cannibalism scene, certain shocking acts are shown but most of the sex and violence remains obscured or outside the frame. Where *Re-penetrator*'s visibility is maximalist, *Trouble Every Day*'s is about *extremus* and *exter*. Furthermore, much of *Trouble Every Day* is taken up by images which are not of sex or violence – walking around Paris, shots of hotel corridors, a day in the laboratory – while *Re-penetrator*'s entire running time involves sex and violence.

This emphasis on the formal and aesthetic specificities of visibility or obscurity in a film demonstrates that I place no positive or negative connotations on either concept. Making something visible is not ethically progressive in itself. Foucault argues that transgression is neither positive nor negative (1977: 34), and that there can be no value judgement attached to sexual liberation or repression as neither changes the power relations at work in sexuality (1978). Visibility is thus intrinsically no better or worse than obscurity, only different. In his study of obscurity in Modernist prose, Allon White nonetheless notes that visibility and light are normally associated with goodness, while obscurity and darkness are associated with evil (1981: 13). These links moreover pervade metaphors related to positive judgements of thought with 'clarity', 'lucidity', 'illumination' and 'enlightenment' seen as desirable in intellectual discourse while 'opacity', 'vagueness', 'obfuscation' and 'veiling' are frowned upon. White argues that "truth, goodness and lucidity fall together in the sunlight, just as falsehood, evil and obscurity fall together in the shade, […] promot[ing] an insidious identification of lucidity, truth and goodness on the one hand, and obscurity, falsehood and evil on the other" (1981: 13). Rather than repeating this 'insidious identification', White suggests we see obscurity as a multiform element of language "which, according to its relationship with more accessible parts of the text, will alter its significance" (1981: 2). As obscurity and visibility are two ends of a

spectrum, we must be specific about the form of visibility or obscurity and its context. How are people, objects and acts made visible or obscured: in close-up or long shot, by too little light or too much, by blurring, by an object or person interrupting our view, by the camera turning away?

Obscurity does not simply mean darkness, but a movement between light and dark: "it simultaneously reveals and conceals. It 'signifies'. Even when (or often, because) things are unclear or imprecise, they become a source of significance" (ibid.). This chapter considers the significance of obscurity as much as visibility, and how our ability to see people and objects can change the experience of viewing a film. I engage closely with how images 'reveal and conceal', as people and objects can be revealed in ways which create shock and surprise, incongruity and confusion, as well as normalcy and acceptance. I examine what particular forms of visibility and obscurity in new extreme films signify, and contend that the form of visibility or obscurity contributes to the same ethical framework created in these films by extremity.

Visibility – extremity – ethics

Extremity and visibility can be linked in numerous ways. Most simply, national boards of classification, which permit the distribution and exhibition of films, commonly classify films according to discrete categories of visible/not visible, said/not said. The BBFC for instance defines a 'sex work', whose "primary purpose is sexual arousal," as material containing "*clear* images of real sex"; these are passed at 'R18' (available only in licensed sex shops) (BBFC 2014: 23; emphasis added). These 'clear images' are compared to the 'simulated' images which may pass at '18' (general release, suitable only for adults) (ibid.). These descriptions highlight

that simulation/reality and visibility are important in the board's distinction between pornographic and non-pornographic films. Moreover, given that 'images of real sex' is not seen as specific enough to define pornography (the addition of 'clear' was necessary), visibility must play a role in defining the 'real' of 'real sex'. While these 'clear images' must have the 'primary purpose' of sexual arousal in order to be defined as pornography, the linkage between visibility and transgression (of the boundary between 18 and R18) demonstrates how invested the British censorship board is in questions of visibility. Simply the visibility of aroused genitals fulfils one of the two criteria for being classified outside of the legal mainstream, placing it at moral and legal boundaries even if subsequent discussions by the board define the film's purpose as not primarily stimulatory.

In concrete terms censorship holds the power to make images visible or obscure by allowing or refusing permission for images to be screened. Obscuring sometimes comes about in the form of black or blurred squares obscuring forbidden images,[21] or in the demand that certain images be cut. In this case, and in the case where a film is banned in its entirety, it is impossible for most people to see the film at all: the material has been removed from the visible realm.

Another limit of visibility is the limit of watchability: the limits an individual sets on the images that they are willing to continue watching, the images they allow to be made visible to them. To suggest that something is too horrible to be shown or to suggest that something should be banned is to argue for the limits of the visible, because as noted above, censorship is intimately linked with visibility. This link between visibility and a desire for censorship also demonstrates how visibility is linked to ethics. In pushing people to the limits of what they are willing to watch, a film asks questions about the difference between what *is* visible and what *should be*

[21] As Williams notes about an early American copy of *The Idiots* (2001: 20).

visible. A person may ignore the film but they may reflect upon that distinction and why the answers to what is and what should be are different. Those who go one step further and call for the film to be banned have necessarily considered this difference. Moreover they have reflected on the nature of spectatorship if they argue it should be banned because of the effects it has on those who watch it. Chris Tookey's (2011) comments on the links between *Human Centipede II: Full Sequence* (Six, 2011) and Dutch murderer Vincent Tabak are scientifically flawed and politically reactionary, but he has thought about the ethical effect of watching a transgressive film. New extreme films make us reflect in more specific ways, but Tookey's comments already demonstrate the potential links between visibility, watchability and ethics.

There are also other ways of conceiving of the limits of visibility, which are relevant for new extreme films, without looking towards obscurity. Grønstad points out, for instance, that "in showing us things, images also occlude our vision, as they constantly get in the way of other images" (2012: 12). The choice of one image is always a choice to obscure a different image. Grønstad contends that the transgressive images of 'unwatchable films' can rupture our "osmotically structured" ways of seeing and make visible "that which is on the other side" (2012: 12). Such a rupture "amounts to an exploratory expansion of the domain of aesthetics, a stretching of the limits of filmicity that would welcome visual displeasure […] transcend[ing] the threshold of the visible world" (2012: 10). The visible world is here understood as the images that are made visible and therefore those made available to the collective imaginary. Going beyond the limits of the visible is to expand the outer limits of conventional images and look at the world in ways not previously possible. This interpretation of visibility is taken from Silverman's reading of Lacan: "in his *Ecrits*, Lacan writes that 'the mirror-image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world' […] Lacan suggests that the subject's corporeal reflection constitutes the limit or boundary within which identification may occur" (1996: 2, 11).

Here we see another link between visibility and ethics: Silverman suggests that our identification and our way of understanding the world are defined by the limits of the 'subject's corporeal reflection' in the mirror, by the limits of visible images. As such, altering the limits of visible images or breaching the 'threshold of the visible world' enables a reappraisal of the subject's identity and how they identify with the world. Grønstad employs this interpretation of visibility when describing the limits of visibility as a paradigmatic, congealed mass of images which form our current mode of perception (2012: 12). A breaching of the threshold of the visible world enables a reappraisal of how we interpret the world; by expanding the visible world, this enables an expansion of how the world can be interpreted and an expansion of our sense of self. This expanded sense of self, an expanded idea of our responsibilities, influences and relations to the world is precisely the ethical manoeuvre identified in chapter 1. To expand the visible world is therefore to change how we look because it redefines the totality, it asks us to reconsider the object we are looking at and this is change how we look at something. To paraphrase Joumana Haddad (2010: 31), this is not a question of proving that a prevalent image is all wrong, but of showing that it is incomplete.

We should also note in the context of 'watchability' that Grønstad's central term is the 'unwatchable' (2011, 2012). Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, in their description of sex in contemporary film, argue that these provocative films call "urgent attention to the limits of the visible and the viewable" (2007: 134). In a comparable way to those moments when viewers call for censorship, thinking about the un/watchable or the un/viewable, we are asked to consider not only what *is* made visible but what we *allow* to be made visible to us by not switching off the DVD or not leaving the cinema. For Grønstad, Best and Crowley, these moments at the limits of the watchable or the viewable have ethical power because of the self-reflexivity they encourage in the spectator. For Best and Crowley erotics is used to "plumb the depths of our

own subjectivity" (2007: 134). For Grønstad, in going beyond what one is conventionally asked to endure in a film we can access "that which hegemonic aesthetic discourses have rendered invisible or unrepresentable" (2012: 10). New extreme films frequently challenge our capacity to continue watching and make us ask why we continue to watch (allow images to be made visible to us). This encourages a self-reflexivity and questions *our* role within the viewing regimes that are being challenged.

In this chapter, looking at the limits of visibility more concretely and bringing together questions of censorship and simulation, I argue that 'modal ambiguities' evoke a sense of authenticity in visible images of sex in relation to *Intimacy*. I turn to questions of disgust and visibility in the work of Julia Kristeva and Julian Hanich in a discussion of *A Hole in my Heart*. This section builds on the notion of 'modal ambiguities' in relation to surgery rather than sex, and explores how visibility is central to the film's confrontation as well as its evocation of disgust and authenticity. I argue that these techniques are used to critique the violence of pornography. I then think about how the films' style might be linked to authenticity by considering links to a 'documentary aesthetic'. This forms part of a wider discussion about the fraught term 'realism': I suggest that in *Baise-moi* (as well as *A Hole in my Heart*) there is an attempt to make visible societal violences which are invisible, but that this is problematically constructed as an attempt to show things 'as they are'. Drawing on Foucault's critique of discourses of liberation in sexuality, I critique *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart* for their insistence on an essentialist construction of pornography and sexuality. This section of the chapter ends with a discussion of *The Idiots*, which makes its critiques of society in a comparable way to *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart*, but introduces them pluralistically, avoiding the essentialism I critique in *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart*.

Modal ambiguities – *Intimacy*

Intimacy charts the anonymous sexual encounters between protagonist Jay and an initially unnamed woman, Claire, which become more emotional and complex when Jay follows Claire home to her family. In the first sex scene in *Intimacy*, Jay and Claire kiss clumsily, struggling to work out how to remove each other's clothing. They separate to remove their underwear and we see Jay's semi-erect penis flop out onto his stomach. A slow dolly brings us closer to the couple as Jay leans down to kiss around Claire's pubic hair, his shadows covering both her genitals and his increasing erection, as they resume their kissing. Cutting to a close-up of Claire removing her top, her head out of the frame, then unzipping her skirt and climbing out of it, the camera follows Jay's hands as he touches Claire's now naked breasts. As she climbs on top of him, we get a brief image of faceless bodies entwined in shadow: nipples, torsos, arms and penis visible in a medium close-up. There is no attempt to cover up aroused genitals, nor to highlight them as the camera moves close to the lovers, sometimes losing heads and body parts from the frame as they move around in close-up. Their entwining pauses briefly as we see Jay put a condom on, an act accompanied by Claire stroking Jay's chest.

Tanya Krzywinska reads scenes such as this one as breaking down the relation between character and actor, the 'real' person and the person they pretend be. This breakdown occurs when the physical manifestations of desire and arousal – erections, wetness, ejaculation – become visible: "a modal ambiguity is created between the real and the fiction. In *Intimacy*, it is Mark Rylance, the actor, as well as Jay, the character, that has an erection" (2006: 222). It is impossible to separate the actor's and the character's emotions: not only can we not distinguish which parts of an actor's performance are more purposefully chosen and which are unconscious movements that the actor does not explicitly choose, but method acting encourages the actor to

engage with personal experiences, imagined scenarios and contextual games in order to give a performance which looks as though the actor is emotionally invested in the scene (see Meisner and Longwell 1987; Strasberg 1988; Adler 2000). A reaction of a character may therefore be 'real' inasmuch as it is based upon a moment in the actor's life when they felt that emotion. In other words, most visible cues divulge no information about the actor's feelings; we can only ever conjecture as to what drove the performance.

In the case of visible involuntary bodily reactions, however, such as erection, vaginal lubrication, ejaculation, erect nipples or goosebumps, there is seepage between reality and fiction which cannot be contained. Although this offers no 'proof' of anything particular (drugs can stimulate erections and lubrication, ice cubes can make nipples stiff, cold air can create goosebumps), the visibility of an ostensibly involuntary reaction gives a hint of reality that breaches the fictional limits of the film. Whatever Rylance's acting prowess in *Intimacy*, Jay's visible erection shows that Rylance is aroused (not just Jay) and as such, we are opened up onto something that is not just fiction (even if it is not entirely fact) in the making visible of that erection.

Such a breach has a comparable phenomenological effect on the spectator as the depiction of animal death. Vivian Sobchack argues that the rabbit's death in *The Rules of the Game [La Règle du jeu]* (Renoir, 1939) "punctuates fictional space with documentary space" (2004: 247) while Michael Lawrence argues that, given that it can never be acted, an animal's death on film "figures the destruction of the difference (the distance) between reality and the representation of reality" (2010: 67). The *visibility* of the erection, the moist vagina, the penetration communicates a sense of reality beyond representation. In both cases, animal death and erection, it is visibility which is key because any obfuscation reawakens the possibility that the death or erec-

tion did not take place. Indeed as Eugenie Brinkema notes, this link is fundamental to the construction of heterosexual pornography: the visibility of male ejaculation indicates that something 'real' has taken place, "the real transgression-stuff must be made visible to prove that the act occurred" (2006: 152). The modal ambiguity introduced by this hint of authenticity, this idea of something 'real' changes the nature of spectatorship marginally, introducing a brief connection with the characters which we would more readily associate with non-fiction films because the characters are momentarily more than just characters.

Visibility is central to understanding how images of sex in new extreme films evoke an *exter* by puncturing the fictional space of a mainstream sex scene with an element of eroticised documentary space. Moreover, as Brinkema notes, (with Krzywinska 2006: 217; Williams 1999: 147) this intrusion of visible sex into the film's fictional space is an indispensable element of pornography. It is a brief transgression into the territory of a censored genre, even if only momentarily. Phenomenologically, we are placed in a comparable situation in relation to a feeling of documentary reality as we would be with pornography or animal death. Looking closely at *Intimacy*'s sex scenes we can also see how its visibility or obscurity pushes up against and transgresses boundaries. My previous points demonstrated *extremus* and *exter* at work in the film's visibility and how this would lead to a film containing visible sex being considered as a new extreme film. However as I have stressed before, visible sex alone does not make a new extreme film. We must examine the particularities of how these images make sex visible and how this links to new extreme films' broader ethical framework.

The scene described above depicts many small movements unusual in the repertoire of visible depictions of sex, such as Claire's hand on Jay's chest, and Jay's nervous touch on Claire's

breasts. Linda Williams mentions these intimate gestures when describing a later scene: we see involuntary jolts of Jay's penis as Claire's hand pushes blood to his glans. As Williams notes,

> while I do not suppose that this gesture is at all uncommon in the contemporary repertoires of heterosexual sex, I found myself shocked to see such an intimate familiar gesture on film. Its hunger, urgency and desire are unprecedented in any known repertoire of cinematic representation. (Williams 2008: 21)

This intimate detail is beyond what would be expected of heterosexual pornography and even though it is 'not at all uncommon', was shocking to Williams. This demonstrates how the provocation of new extreme films need not always be in violent and unfamiliar images, but can be in the making visible of something recognisable but from a different perspective. This is the expansion of the visible world.

This reinterpreting of certain gestures in a sexual context parallels the reinterpretation of the erect penis in *Intimacy*'s sex scenes. Although we see Jay's erect penis several times, it is shot in close-up only once and is shown less to be a powerful phallic weapon than a vulnerable fleshy appendage. Williams argues that the erect penis in pornography is depicted as 'powerful' (1989: 119), that it "symbolises phallic power and potency" (ibid.: 247) and that "phallic power tries to erect the penis as the unity symbol of plenitude" (ibid.: 268). In contrast, Claire's touch on Jay's penis "makes us see the fleshy vulnerability of the organ" and "the way it responds to the woman's desire" (2008: 22) rather than controlling and directing that desire. Although Jay's penis is viewed in states of pre- and post-coital tumescence, it is also filmed flopping and dangling, wrapped in redundant bits of latex, while some sex is mutually dissatisfying. Jay's penis is far from the indomitable phallic symbol of potency and plenitude. The lack of close-ups mean that it is mostly viewed fleetingly, in the corner of the frame, in the shadows of Claire's

body or framed by Claire's mouth or hand; a small presence in the sex act rather than its key element. *Intimacy* encourages a reassessment of the symbolic power of the penis and its male bearer both societally and in the sex act. Rather than expecting sex to revolve around the unassailable might of the erect penis, the penis is vulnerable, fleshy and responsive even as it is also pulsing and hard. We are made to look again at how we conventionally interpret the penis and its symbolic power even as the context in which this is done is penetration, fellatio and mutual masturbation, which are exactly the acts which one would see in conventional pornographic sex.

Disgust – *A Hole in my Heart*

Visibility and authenticity, or visibility and a sense of documentary space, can also be linked without sex, such as in surgery or vomiting. Modal ambiguity is relevant here because the piercing of the skin with needles (as we see in *A Hole in my Heart*) cannot be acted out, the actor's skin has been punctured as well as the character's. Similarly, in a scene where it is apparent that an actor has actually thrown up rather than only pretending to, we can talk of the incursion of documentary space because the camera has captured semi-digested food being expelled from someone's mouth, a reaction which cannot be fully controlled. However, the disgusted reaction we may have to these images cannot solely be explained by the images' apparent authenticity. Audiences are frequently disgusted by obviously fictional acts in horror or comedy films and given the degree of verisimilitude in torture scenes in *Saw* and *Hostel*, we may reasonably be doubtful as to the veracity of images of surgery unless we have extra-textual knowledge about the film's images and must therefore also consider the visibility of the act, fictional or otherwise. Drawing on a passage by Kristeva and from scholars of disgust, I will

explore how visibility is relevant for the communication of disgust and how this can be linked to authenticity and the ethical framework of new extreme films.

Kristeva's description of one's initial encounter with the abject carefully links visibility, affect and an ethical questioning of the nature of images. Reflecting on the skin of once-warm milk she notes:

> When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk […] I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in my stomach, my belly; and all my viscera shrivel up my body, provoke tears and bile, increase my heartbeat, cause my forehead and hands to perspire. (Kristeva 1982: 2; translation altered)

In her reaction to the abject, sight is quickly linked to touch and then to visceral and corporeal reactions; tears, bile, pounding heart, tensing body. I cite this passage not to think about psychoanalysis in new extreme cinema, but because of the linkage between sight, affect and abjection. Kristeva reads the milk skin symptomatically like one might a film, attributing to particular affectively charged properties of the milk an underlying symptom: abjection. Like a film, by only seeing (and hearing) the milk, neither smelling nor tasting it, Kristeva gains access to something fundamental (the evocation of the abject) which she quickly expands to include 'the shameless rapist', 'the traitor' and 'the liar', which are extrapolated far beyond her original bodily reaction to the milk skin (spasms, tears, bile) (1982: 4). In the language of extremity, it is the visibility of small bits of *exter* that push us into feeling something about more abstract concepts.

Scholars such as Julian Hanich, Carl Plantinga and Winfried Menninghaus argue that images of disgust are able to elicit the affective reactions that Kristeva describes because we experience

them in a similar way to having the real act in front of us. Carl Plantinga argues that disgust "causes aversive tendencies that are identical to those we might experience outside the movie theatre […] [the difference between] our reactions to actual and photographically represented disgusting objects is one of degree and not of kind" (2006: 86). Where Sobchack writes of the puncturing of fictional space with documentary, and Lawrence and Krzywinska emphasise the inseparability of the actor's and character's bodies, Plantinga argues for the inseparability of the mediated and unmediated event in scenes of disgust. As a spectator, we do experience a part of the feeling of being there in person. This echoes Ardenne's and Hester's comments mentioned in chapter 1 about the desire of the spectator of an extreme event to "experience at least a ghost of [its] intensity for oneself" (Hester 2014: 122) because in Plantinga's formulation a less intense experience of the original event is precisely what images of disgust communicate.

Seen from a different angle, this intrusion of the experience of the real event becomes a provocative, confrontational move. Rather than desiring the intensity of something we wish to experience ourselves, in the context of acts we do *not* wish to experience this sense of 'real' disgust can be "too close to its real-life equivalent" (Hanich 2009: 304). We are uncomfortable in being brought face-to-face with the unpleasantness of the situation depicted in the film. Menninghaus suggests that this arises as a result of the contract between viewer and artwork being altered: "I am disgusted – therefore I experience something as unconditionally real *(not at all as art)*" (2003: 9). The shock of disgust (or aroused genitals) in an arthouse film on general release might then also stem from the destabilisation of the spectatorial contract where we expect fictional films to remain fictional. It helps to explain why disgusting films are normally rejected as low art because, in Menninghaus's reading, their 'reality' discounts their status as 'art'.

Without engaging in a discussion about the nature of 'art', these conceptualisations of disgust are relevant to my comments on arousal and visibility. Firstly, the visibility of arousing or disgusting acts is central to their being experienced as authentic; secondly, the experience of disgust is inherently linked to a sense of authenticity; thirdly, the sudden experience of something beyond the fictional realms of a fiction film (an *exter*) can be confrontational for the spectator. Finally, following Kristeva the visibility of these intrusive, confrontational acts can be seen as part of an ethical framework which encourages spectatorial reflection on abstract concepts and on the nature of the acts we are watching.

A Hole in my Heart is a claustrophobic film in which a father, Richard, brings a friend, Geko, and a woman, Tess, into his cramped flat to make a porn film while his son, Erik, hides away in his dark room. It is rapidly edited and is mostly filmed in one small apartment on handheld cameras which emphasises the confinement, as the camera is rarely more than a few feet from the characters. Within the apartment there are many sudden spatial shifts between the rooms, interviews with characters, shots of genital surgery and whimsical scenes in a field or a supermarket. As discussed in relation to *Intimacy*, the visibility of the transgressive, here such as genitals, operates according to *extremus* and *exter*. We see Geko and Richard's genitals many times in the film (more casually and frequently than in a mainstream film); nonetheless although they are making a porn film, we never see their penises erect which maintains these images in an *extremus*. These images are pornographic inasmuch as a porn film is being made, but do not transgress BBFC guidelines by showing 'real sex'. Nonetheless visible images of pubic hair being shaved, Geko urinating in a glass, and Tess masturbating with a toothbrush show sexual, if not penetrative, acts and represent an *exter* of common film standards. Finally, we have visible combinations of sex and violence: close-ups of female genital reconstruction surgery, Geko and Tess masturbating with pieces of meat, a plastic vagina being cut apart, a

dildo penetrating a roast chicken and smashing other toys, and the genitals and breasts of an image of a naked woman being shot at with a pellet gun. Animate and inanimate sexual objects (human genitals, plastic genitals, sex toys) meet violence and destruction (cutting, stitching, crushing, raping). This eroticised violence is *exter* for its combining of two elements which would already place a scene at the outer edge of what can be expected in a film: visible sex acts and graphic violence. Nonetheless, given that these *exter* images only constitute a small part of the film (indeed many feature in a rapidly edited montage towards the end of the film), the majority of the film's acts are either *extremus*, or far from limits. Recognisable non-transgressive scenes include discussions between the three adults and the son, a supermarket shop, a teenage argument between father and son, or amusing antics in a laundrette when Tess and Erik just play together. There are some *exter* acts but this remains a film perched on the boundary in terms of what it makes visible to the spectator.

A Hole in my Heart employs these extreme images to corporeally provoke the viewer, predominantly by disgusting them. This is how this fictitious story of the making of a porn film becomes a critique of pornography. I focus especially on the sequence at the end of the film where pornography is depicted via the disgusting spectacle of a food fight. Towards the end of *A Hole in my Heart*, Geko and Richard enact a coercive sex scene in which Geko angrily faces up to Tess with a balaclava and a baseball bat; Tess flees the apartment in horror but returns later after an extravagant supermarket shop, armed with large amounts of food. While they begin by having an enjoyable party, this is intercut with later images when they have been reduced to a state of debauchery with food being thrown and squirted at each other, especially at Tess. Geko squirts mustard as though from his penis and Tess quickly ends up with her face covered in ketchup and mustard. Within this sequence, we see Geko stuffing food into Tess's mouth in close-up while she sits with her eyes closed and mouth wide open, the food in her mouth and

on her face visible. The camera cuts to a shot of her feet, tilting up to look up her skirt and back up to her face, where Geko is pushing a Frankfurter back and forth in her full mouth, saying 'breathe through your nose'. Tess is then on her knees with food being stuffed into her mouth before falling to the floor, looking comatose, as an unpleasant clicking sound appears on the soundtrack. Finally, a close-up shows washing-up liquid being squirted into Tess's unmoving open mouth on the floor. The images of Tess with sauce on her face, her mouth so full she can barely breathe, with washing-up liquid filling any available space, are simply disgusting. As well as feeling my stomach churn, the images of Tess's full mouth made me want to retch, much like the image of her mouth being penetrated by a Frankfurter. A later scene shows Geko vomit into Tess's mouth in a revolting mutation of the pornographic 'money'-shot. Although we hear noises of Geko retching throughout the short scene, he is mainly absent with the camera focussed on Tess lying on the couch and Richard filming her. When Geko does vomit, the lumpy liquid is clear to see, dripping into Tess's mouth and spilling onto the couch next to her. A close-up shows vomit on her face before she sits up and the screen cuts to black.

We see vomit for only a few seconds but this is enough to disgust most viewers: Anthony Lane describes 800 people in the cinema with him being 'rocked back' by the shock of this moment (2005); Mariah Larsson reports that Thorsten Flinck (Richard) was disgusted by this 'nauseating climax' (2011: 145; 153n7); while James Berardinelli describes the film as a whole as creating the experience of being "dragged through a vat of raw sewage" (2004). These reviews and my own experience attest to how the visibility of vomit, full mouths and food on faces invade the body, creating disgusted sensations of nausea, shock and the feeling of having sewage on your face. Modal ambiguities between actor and character, reality and fiction, documentary and fiction are exploited to confront the spectator with unpleasant physical sensations

and make it difficult for them to distance themselves from, or remain unemotional in the face of, the images.

Having established *A Hole in my Heart*'s 'extreme' use of visibility, appeal to authenticity, and corporeal confrontation of the spectator, we can see that these affects are used to critique the violence of pornography and to encourage the spectator to see violence instead of the pleasure one might associate with pornography.[22] In the food fight scene, with her eyes closed, face covered in thick sauces and mouth open, Tess looks like an object of Bukkake;[23] a sausage forced repeatedly into her mouth, it looks as though her mouth is being fucked, a dominating brutal version of fellatio; being told to breathe through her nose, she is being instructed on how to submit to an uncomfortable fellatio; unmoving on the floor with washing-up liquid sprayed in her mouth, she looks like an abused, rejected sex object. The scene where Tess lies prostrate waiting for Geko's vomit can also be read as a disgusting replacement for the 'money'-shot where Geko ejaculates vomit rather than semen. As Larsson notes, a "more disgusting statement against pornography could not be made. By replacing sperm with vomit, the film defamiliarises what pornography has normalised – the degradation of women" (2011: 149). With each of these affective, reconfigured images of pornographic acts, *A Hole in my Heart* destabilises common interpretations of particular sexual choreographies and of pornography more generally. By making the spectator disgusted at the pornographic spectacle and involving them corporeally in violence, meant to represent pornography, we are encouraged to consider the nature of pornographic images and the violences that underpin their creation. The horror and violence of the porn film is further emphasised by the juxtaposition of the debauchery of the porn set with the Edenic nature of spaces outside the living room and bathroom. In Erik's room the

[22] Critics such as Anthony Lane may critique an argument about the degrading nature of pornography as "hardly controversial" (2005) but my point is about how this argument is made rather than a discussion about the nature of pornography.
[23] A practice where numerous men ejaculate on a woman'.

maximising visibility of pornography is rejected as he puts black covers on the windows and looks after earthworms; Geko dreams of frolicking happily in a field of golden corn; Erik and Tess develop a quasi-mother-son bond towards the end, playing games in a laundrette. Larsson notes that this juxtaposition subverts the clichéd logic of the naturality of nakedness as the fully clothed scenes off the porn set are the most enjoyable, happy and liberating as the characters relax, open up to each other and enjoy their surroundings: "nudity is clearly not the path to liberation or enlightenment" (Larsson 2011: 148). The visibility of all these disgusting acts becomes a way of critiquing the visibility of the body in pornography and of making visible, by making physical, the unseen violences of pornography and the porn industry.

However, we should be critical of a film which exploits the visibility of bodily acts in order to critique the visibility of other bodily acts: *A Hole in my Heart* avoids depicting aroused genitals or visible sex and yet includes close-ups of genitalia undergoing surgery. As Larsson asks, "why should it be acceptable and non-exploitative to show female genitalia in close-up with the intent to shock and disgust but not with the intent to arouse?" (2011: 149). This creates a set of double standards, where certain forms of political activism are allowed to break rules about exploitation that the activists would like to see applied to pornography. Moreover, rather than trying to suggest that we should look at pornography from different angles, seeing its structural problems but appreciating that some depictions of visible sex might not be exploitative, *A Hole in my Heart* seems to suggest that there is only one way to interpret images of visible sex. For *A Hole in my Heart*, all pornography is violence. The film's sexual content is conflated with violence in as many ways as possible and these conflations cover as many aspects of pornography as possible: not only fellatio, 'money' shots, anal sex, Bukkake, coercive sex and female masturbation, but also pubic hair removal, sex toys, vaginal lubrication and genital aesthetics (made to conform through surgery). Such a thorough attempt to conflate *all*

aspects of pornography with violence leaves little room for any other interpretations of pornography. Moreover, in showing as many links as possible, this critique conforms to the maximalist tendencies of pornography. I return to philosophical issues raised by this approach after my analysis of a comparable approach in *Baise-moi*, but it suffices to say that this does not sound like the expansion of the visible world discussed earlier in this chapter. In contrast, *A Hole in my Heart* seeks to replace aspects of the visible world, dictating how we should interpret pornographic images and exploiting the methods being critiqued (an exploitation of the female body). *A Hole in my Heart*'s use of provocative and confrontational imagery attempts to change how we view pornography by connecting the choreography of pornography and the visibility of these acts with unpleasant and disgusting rather than pleasurable sensations. This involves the 'excorporative' identification Silverman suggests ethical images should adopt (1996: 2) as well as the retroactive revision (ibid.: 3) of how we interpret pornography as a result of the bodily reactions we have to the images in *A Hole in my Heart*. However the dogmatism of the conclusions drawn does not tally with the pluralistic vision of the world that scholars such as Silverman, Kuppers and Kozol hope the ethical images they describe will construct.

Authenticity – *Baise-moi*

Modal ambiguities and disgust are two ways in which visibility is used in *Intimacy* and *A Hole in my Heart* to communicate a sense of authenticity and to confront the spectator corporeally with the films' images. Another noticeable feature of *A Hole in my Heart* is its shaky, handheld, grainy digital style (Berardinelli 2004), a style which is also mentioned by critics in relation to *Baise-moi* (Mühleisen 2005; Archer 2009; Forrest 2013) and *The Idiots* (Bainbridge 2007; Simons 2007; Badley 2010). In these accounts, this style is described as 'quasi-documentary',

'pseudo-documentary', 'documentary-like' and 'fiction-as-documentary', suggesting that the evocation of documentary plays a role in how we experience these films. This documentary-like style communicates a sense of authenticity in addition to the modal ambiguities in these films, which makes the film-viewing experience even more confrontational as there is further seepage between fiction and reality, fictional space and documentary space. Moreover this is relevant to visibility because it speaks to nuanced definitions of visibility: in *A Hole in my Heart*, *Baise-moi* and *The Idiots*, images are often blurry, out of focus, shown briefly as the camera moves quickly, shown in the corner of the screen or shown with a grainy texture because of the cameras used. The content of these images is visible in one sense, but also obscured from being sharp and completely clear, a description which fits well with my argument that visibility in new extreme films is about the borders of the visible and the obscure, not simply a question of being in view or not.

Nonetheless, a difficulty with considering that a 'documentary aesthetic' plays a role in the evocation of authenticity is defining what constitutes a 'documentary aesthetic'. Michael Renov argues that "it is unwise to generalise any uniform laws of construction for nonfiction film and video […] documentary has availed itself of nearly every constructive device known to fiction and […] virtually every register of cinematic syntax" (1993: 6). Noel Carroll states that "on the grounds of formal differentiae, one cannot distinguish fiction films from non-fiction films" (2006: 156). In Nichols's definition of documentary (2010: 24), questions of aesthetics are entirely absent. According to such theorists, terms such as 'documentary style' or 'documentary aesthetic' cannot exist or are fundamentally meaningless. Yet, Nichols implicitly makes a distinction between documentary and a smaller subgroup of the 'conventional documentary' (2010: 10), whilst also declaring that fictional films such as *Battleship Potemkin [Броненосец «Потёмкин»]* (Eisenstein, 1925) and *Bicycle Thieves [Ladri di biciclette]* (de

Sica, 1948) each have a "style [which] locates them very close to the documentary tradition" (ibid.). Therefore despite aesthetics being absent from his definition of documentary, Nichols's use of the term 'documentary' suggests that there *is* such a thing as documentary style, and that this distinguishes 'conventional documentaries' from being mere 'documentaries': they look like a documentary or are perceived as such by the general public.

Renov acknowledges this distinction when he separates the aesthetics that documentaries *can* take (any aesthetic can feature in a documentary), and aesthetic choices which are often judged as being linked to documentary. As an example, Renov gives the use by advertisers of a 'low-tech look', "the grittier and grainier the better", as an authentic "antidote to their implicit fraud-ulence" (1993: 8). The advert is not trying to authentically document its product, but rather uses the *perceived* links to documentary of certain aesthetic choices to suggest an authenticity in their brand. Given that the advertising context discounts most other markers of documentary – such as 'real people', a direct view of the historical world rather than fictional allegory, a desire to inform, give insight or raise awareness (Nichols 2010: 14; 40) –, the advert's style becomes the only aspect to evoke the documentary and its associated claims to authenticity. While defining a documentary aesthetic might be impossible, this does not mean that it does not exist in the perceptions of viewers. Just as I discussed in chapter 1 the need to understand genre as participatory rather than exclusive, we can see documentary aesthetic in a comparable way. While documentaries can take any form, a significant number of films that participate in the genre of 'films that look like documentaries' will exhibit characteristics of what Nichols calls the conventional documentary. These stylistic elements include handheld-camera use, low-quality images, natural lighting, talking directly to the camera, variable sound quality and inconsistent framing, all of which we see in influential recent documentaries, such as *Bowling*

for Columbine (Moore, 2002) and *Supersize Me* (Spurlock, 2004). Evidently not all documentaries look like Moore's or Spurlock's films, but fictional films evincing enough aesthetic similarities are able to evoke enough aspects of documentary to communicate some of the authenticity connected to documentary filmmaking. This is borne out in the attribution of adjectives related to documentary (see above) and realism or authenticity in *A Hole in my Heart*, *Baise-moi* and *The Idiots*. Once again, particular aspects of visibility can be linked to authenticity and, as I will show, confrontation and ethical questioning.

Baise-moi tells the story of Nadine and Manu who become friends when they both flee their home neighbourhood after having committed murders. Manu is also raped at the beginning of the film and they set off on a murder- and sex-fuelled rampage across France. Although presented as a fictional story, *Baise-moi*'s aesthetic is described by Alix Sharkey as giving the film a "pseudo-documentary texture" and by J.R.Gregory as "adding to the realism and downbeat tone" (both quoted in Forrest 2013: 7). The aesthetic of the film, which Amy Forrest describes as a "'real-life' aesthetic" (ibid.), is explicitly linked to the experience of the film's 'realism'. While some reviewers critiqued the film's aesthetic as proof of the filmmakers' poor workmanship, others identified this form of making visible/obscuring of the image as adding to the perception of watching something authentic and true-to-life. As Forrest continues:

> The gritty *mise-en-scène*, fairly simple script, natural lighting, low budget, use of a hand-held camera, low-quality digital video, and punk-inspired soundtrack incite film reviewers to come to the conclusion that the film's grainy "look" either reveals the unprofessionalism of the crew or successfully mirrors the film's graphic themes. (Forrest 2013: 7)

The unpolished aesthetic, which does not seek to make the events as visible and accessible as possible, mirrors the unpolished raw nature of the events we see on-screen. This is not simply a means of absorbing us in the narrative for a 'realistic' experience of sex, violence and poor milieux. Rather, together with modal ambiguities and disgust, the aesthetic forms part of a commentary on the treatment of women, rape, sex and sexuality. As Neil Archer notes, far from being a strategy of immersion, *Baise-moi*'s "fiction-as-documentary aesthetic" means that the film "resist[s] easy assimilation within the mode of cinematic identification" and therefore effaces "the fictional suspension of its textual subjects" (2009: 75). The film is less about drawing the viewer into the fiction and more about making us see the events as an authentic depiction of women, sex and rape. It is through the confrontational corporeal strategies related to visibility – modal ambiguities, disgust, arousal, 'documentary aesthetics' – that such ethical questioning takes place.

Modal ambiguities are present in *Baise-moi* with all the sex acts being performed rather than simulated by the actors: we see vaginal penetration, fellatio, cunnilingus, masturbation and ejaculation in numerous scenes. The actors as well as the characters are having sex. The authenticity of these scenes may be further increased for viewers who know that the two lead actors (Karen Bach and Raffaëla Anderson) as well as the co-directors (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh-Thi) have been sex workers. Barker et al's study into sexual violence which questioned viewers about *Baise-moi*, noted frequent references to the film's authenticity or realism, terms which were often linked to the visibility of penetration in the rape scene. In the rape scene we see the lead rapist's erection on several occasions and two clear shots of penetration, one in close-up and one in medium-long shot. As one of the study's respondents says, "it's like watching an *actual* rape, that's what's so disturbing seeing it, he's actually having sex

with her…" (Barker and others 2007: 88; see also 70-72) and another says "although its consensual, its still real" (ibid.: 71 [*sic*]). Barker et al summarise these responses as using a "'real-world' criterion: this is real, unprettied, random, everyday rape" (ibid.: 91), pointing out that this textual interpretation and extra-textual interpretations of the actors' lives become "mutually reinforcing" in some respondents who have that knowledge (ibid.: 85). In this case the conflation of the lives of the actors with those of the characters becomes a further modal ambiguity: not only does documentary space enter the fictional space but documentary history invades the fictional histories of the characters. Such authenticity is added to by scenes which might be construed as disgusting such as when Manu gives fellatio to a man and then subsequently vomits into his lap. Here the vomit combines with the visible sex acts of other scenes to confront the spectator with an unpleasant sense of authenticity.

The controversial rape scene in *Baise-moi,* which takes place just nine minutes into the film is a good example of this. It contains relatively long takes (an average of over 10 seconds for the scene), a significant number of close-ups, and, several close-ups of penetration. Beginning on a bench when the rapist-kidnappers arrive, the image cuts to a car entering a warehouse, with the two women captive inside. Close-ups show Manu's friend being beaten in the face as the main rapist undresses her and punches her when she fights back. This is intercut with shots of Manu being dragged from the car. Suddenly a close-up shot of a condomed penis being inserted into a vagina engulfs the screen accompanied by the friend's screams. After more close-ups of the friend's beaten face, there is a longer shot of the rapist raping her on the car bonnet. As he suggests exchanging victims with another rapist, a long shot shows his penis hanging out of his trousers and another shows him masturbating before raping Manu, where penetration is again visible. As well as the sudden close-up of penetration being shocking both in content and the cut to a close-up shot, there is no denying that penetration is taking place. The sex and the

violence are both shown, sometimes in close-up. Nonetheless some images such as the rapist masturbating are shown in long-shot so even if his erect penis and Manu's naked genitals are visible, in this image they are not visible in any detail given the distance of the characters from the camera.

The visibility of the sex and violence is, however, integral to the realist impact of this scene, because it emphasises the intrusive, penetrative, invasive aspects of rape; it makes concrete and visible what happens when a person is raped. Indeed numerous respondents in Barker et al's study criticised the BBFC's decision to cut the penetration shots for the UK release because these visible shots "are a sign of a will to intrude on the[] [women's] bodies, and as a possessing of them" (ibid.: 91). The cutting of this scene "is regretted since it reduces that awareness of the women's 'possession' by men" (ibid.). The visibility of penetration is integral to making visible aspects of rape (physical penetration) that are not normally visible in film. Even more compelling to this argument is the fact that respondents who criticised the film because visible penetration is a 'marker of pornography' and a sign of the 'will to arousal', agreed that the visible penetration in this scene had nothing to do with arousal (ibid.: 40). Implicitly these respondents are acknowledging the links between the visibility of penetration and the making visible of the invasive violence of rape, because they cannot link these images of penetration to arousal as they ordinarily would. I am not suggesting that this film presents an archetypal depiction of rape nor that it suggests that all rape is reducible to this depiction. Nonetheless, this scene is filmed with such visibility in order to make visible the violence that underpins rape and the intrusive horror of the attack; as another of Barker et al's respondents asks: "you do know that rape in the real world often has penetration, right?" (2007: 71 [*sic*]). Rape involves penetration and so the film shows penetration. This way of thinking is not however limited to the rape scene; rather, the rape scene is emblematic of a way of thinking which runs through

the whole film and is also present in *A Hole in my Heart*'s attempt to depict the abstract violences of pornography by making visible physical violence.

Beyond the rape scene, Manu and Nadine are subjected to a torrent of abuse, verbal and physical assaults, aggressions, beatings, and the coerciveness of sex clients, male family members and other men in the community. Manu is verbally and physically abused by her brother and is harassed in the street by a variety of men, while Nadine is subjected to controlling sex by a client who uses her mouth like a sex toy and tries to kiss her although she does not want him to. After the ambiguous opening shot of Nadine in a dog-collar, we see a scene of a controlling relationship in a bar (to which Nadine is an onlooker), a scene of Manu being hassled in the street by two men, and then a porn film in which a woman is tied up by two men. Images of power, control and abuse make up the film's entire opening.

Slavoj Žižek (2009) argues that we should see physical assaults as 'subjective violence', which encompasses visible acts of aggression, conflict and brutality. 'Objective violence' denotes violences that sustain the status quo, that inflict symbolic and systemic violences on particular groups: the invisible forces of control, power and enforcement that underpin societal relations. For Žižek, 'objective violence' is the violence "inherent to [the] 'normal' state of things," while 'subjective violence' is the seemingly "irrational explosions" which perturb the "'normal', peaceful state of things" (2009: 1–2). In *Baise-moi*, however, the unseen violences of patriarchy are made visible in the barrage of physical male violence that overwhelms the opening twenty minutes of the film. Many of the men who inflict the assaults remain nameless, history-less and their assaults unexplained. That this is seen as systemic rather than subjective violence is further highlighted in the cross-cutting between the verbal abuse of Manu by her brother, and of Nadine by her (female) housemate: just because Nadine's housemate is a woman does not mean

she escapes being part of patriarchal violence. Nadine's and Manu's murders of the housemate and brother respectively are therefore their first violent responses to the systemic violences which surround them.

Systemic violences are made visible just as the generally unseen penetrative invasion of rape is made visible in the rape scene. If Manu's and Nadine's world seems extraordinarily violent, it is because their world *is* extremely violent; normally such societal violence remains hidden or is overlooked by a dominant, white, male cultural gaze which does not perceive it. The societal violence of patriarchal, phallocentric society is made visible in *Baise-moi* just as the violence of pornography can be seen in *A Hole in my Heart*. In both films, the making visible of physical violences communicates the invisible violences of societal relations between groups and individuals. Through modal ambiguities, disgust and other forms of authenticity, the spectator is confronted with the unpleasant affect of the physical violences we see. We are confronted with and encouraged to see the normally invisible systemic violence that these physical violences represent. We are asked to re-interpret images of women (*Baise-moi*) and pornography (*A Hole in my Heart*) through this confrontation.

In *Baise-moi* we are also asked to see the constructedness of femininity, female sexuality and images of women. The film challenges assumptions about sexual relations between men and women, and discourses around pornography, sex work and sexual violence. While the patriarchal violence of society is made visible, the protagonists are not cast as victims within this; indeed the film challenges such a stance. Nadine is unashamed about using sex work to pay the bills, despite her flatmate's judgmental response; Nadine is also a consumer of heterosexual porn and recognises Manu from a film. Manu refuses to be cast as a victim of anything more than theft when explaining her numb reaction to the rape to her friend: "my pussy, I can't stop

the bastards getting in there, so I don't leave anything precious up there". Each of the explicit sex acts are driven by the women's desires: all the men are seduced by the women and become the object of the women's sexual gaze, reduced to superficial bodies that fulfil Nadine's and Manu's needs and desires. Even though the aesthetic is often similar to conventional pornography with close-ups on fellatio and penetration, minimal narrative introduction to the sex, and an encyclopaedic display of positions, the sex seems to be filmed as such less for the pleasures of an external male viewer and more as an enactment of the women's desires. This distinction is highlighted in two ways in a hotel scene where Manu and Nadine have sex at the same time on adjoining beds.

Firstly, there is a moment, while both women are being penetrated by the men, when the image shows Nadine looking over to Manu with a half-smile on her face, as though to share her satisfaction with Manu, to enjoy Manu's pleasure, and to revel in the camaraderie of the moment; the next shot shows the gaze returned by Manu who evinces similar emotions. As Downing notes, this is not a "'transvestite' female gaze, that false-consciousness-provoked usurping of the masculine position". Nadine's "enjoyment of watching Manu's body does not lead her to a depersonalising objectification of the other, but to respect and friendship and, moreover, to an answering desirous gaze in which watched becomes watcher, rendering the differences between those positions fluid and interchangeable rather than fixed and fixing" (2006: 59; 62). Although the images are drawn from pornography, they displace slightly the conventional structure of the gaze, encouraging us to look at the women and their relationships differently to how we are encouraged to look at women in conventional pornography, even as these images remain recognisable within a pornographic idiom. It is this apparent disjunction between pornographic images, but a non-objectifying non-male-gaze mode of looking that leads Shirley Jordan to describe *Baise-moi* as 'anti-pornography' which "forces the reader/spectator to think"

about pornography (2002: 137). Such a change in the viewing relations is made clear when one of the men is expelled from the room after suggesting that Manu and Nadine perform a '69' for the men's viewing pleasure. This form of gaze has no place in Manu's and Nadine's sex and the return to the previous exchange of gazes is signalled when Manu directs her erstwhile partner to have sex with Nadine; Manu lies back contentedly with her beer, looking over with a smile, happy for her friend. The spectacle of visible sex is therefore questioned, an interrogation that takes place because of, rather than despite, the visible sex: creating a spectacle generally connoted with pornography and changing it slightly, but fundamentally, encourages us to rethink how we look at images of visible sex.

Having said this, the increasingly hyperbolic depiction of violence within *Baise-moi* raises a few issues about the ethical status of these confrontations. When Manu and Nadine kill the gun-shop owner, his fall to the floor is shown in slow-motion just as most of the murders in the film are shown in slow-motion. Moreover, there are numerous almost-comedic moments late in the film when a man is shot whilst penetrating a woman and another collapses after trying to escape with his trousers around his ankles. A montage after the massacre in a sex club shows these corpses and the final murder which involves blood spattering across the camera after a man is shot through the anus, an image which fades to red. If the early parts of the film emphasised the authenticity of the acts being depicted, these later scenes emphasise their artificiality with the characters' death throes performed with extravagant theatricality, pints of fake blood being spilt, and B-movie slow-motion effects. Given that all the violence clearly does not take place as it appears on screen, there are fundamental differences between the sex scenes – imbued with authenticity – and the scenes of violence with their focus on hyperbolic special effects. As Downing notes:

> [the film's] exposure of deliberately 'real' sex, juxtaposed with the presentation of 'pretend' violence, risks suggesting the 'truth value' of one set of images, while insisting upon the surface performativity of the other. It risks upholding at the level of the visual the myth of the 'natural' or 'inevitable' status of sex, which the film has worked hard at the discursive level to undercut. (Downing 2006: 57)

As described above, the earlier rape and sex sequences encourage the viewers to see alternative ways of viewing sex and sexual violence. Implicitly this undermines the naturalness of certain ideas: visible sex as only about male pleasure, of rape as worse than death, of a woman's gaze only being understandable in terms of a transvestite male gaze. If, however, the visibility of sex becomes meaningful in and of itself rather than an element in allowing new perspectives to be formed on pornography and rape, the film's revelations about sex and violence become fundamentally linked to the visibility of sex.

This suggests that the revelation of sex is itself able to open up the 'truth' of sexuality, sex and gender. This is problematic, firstly because it seems to suggest that "the act of heterosexual intercourse is the ultimate truth of sexuality" (Downing 2002: 31) given that it is the principle means by which all new perspectives in the film are facilitated. Secondly, such a linking of visibility and revelation constructs a discourse of the 'truth' of revelation as though the structural workings of society will be revealed in images of visible sex. For Foucault, locating a 'truth of sex' is highly problematic, as is any construction of "a discourse of supposed 'repression' which might be opposed by pornographic 'revelation'" (Best and Crowley 2007: 64). In Foucauldian thinking, sexual 'repression' and 'liberation' can be superficial manifestations of the same underlying power structures. The rules are no fewer and the system no inherently freer in either a sexually liberal or a sexually repressive state. As such, "the valorisation of explicit representation and the desire to display it unreservedly within mainstream narrative as

a badge of emancipation fall into a […] trap in thinking" (Downing 2004: 266). The trap is to see these concepts as emancipatory in themselves. Indeed referring to Foucault's idea of the 'will to knowledge', Williams points out that heterosexual pornography is phallocentric principally because of how it claims to 'know' the body and see the 'truth' of sex. As such, more images of vaginas will not alter the phallocentricity of images of sex if they too submit to an ideology which claims to see the 'truth' of female sexuality (1999: 102; 247). In positioning visible sex as *the* way of understanding sex, sexuality, the male gaze and sexual violence, *Baise-moi* subscribes to the ideology of a 'truth' of sex and the emancipatory power of visibility in itself. Not only is this misguided, but it re-inscribes the film firmly within the phallocentric ideology which it has worked to critique.

A comparable argument can be made about *A Hole in my Heart* which sees violence as the 'truth' of pornography, and considers the visibility of vomit, surgery and other disgusting acts as containing an emancipatory, revelatory power. Let us now look at *The Idiots* to see how one new extreme film approaches sex, sexuality and society using the techniques of modal ambiguity, disgust and a documentary aesthetic, but which uses a variety of different perspectives within the film to deny any one way of viewing these subjects, and remains critical of discourses of 'truth'.

Irreconcilable contradictions – *The Idiots*

Like *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart*, *The Idiots* has been described in terms of realism and authenticity. *The Idiots* tells the story of an ostensibly anti-bourgeois group that pretend to be intellectually disabled – what they call 'spassing' – in both private and public situations. *The*

Idiots contains modal ambiguities with visible erections, visible penetration, and scenes of disgust with food dribbled and spat. Most remarked upon by critics is the film's aesthetic, which arises by following the Dogme 95 manifesto and ends up containing many elements which link it to documentary modes or at least distance it from the usual erasure of production processes we see in fiction films. Commentators refer to *The Idiots*'s 'documentary 'reality'' (Bainbridge 2004: 393) or "documentary-style practice" (Badley 2010: 57). Caroline Bainbridge writes of *The Idiots* being "indexical of reality" (2004: 393), of directly addressing the spectator (ibid.: 395), of action unfolding as though live (ibid.: 394), of familiarity and ordinariness (2007: 89) and of *The Idiots* being aligned with John Corner's 'evidential mode 1' or Nichols' 'observational mode,' (ibid.: 94) modes which are part of the authors' taxonomies of documentary. In *The Idiots*, many sequences have no particular purpose, simply recording the group's discussions as though on a reality-television show; the action unfolds as though live, with the camera following rather than anticipating the action, whilst boom microphones and other camerapeople appear accidentally. Moreover, editing within sequences does not match up, showing the construction of the film, and talking head interviews with the characters give the impression of looking back on a show created in the past.

In a scene when the protagonists go 'spassing' at the local swimming baths, it is clear that a vast amount of unblocked footage was edited down into the short scene. Where we would expect continuity in a fictional film, there are numerous continuity 'errors' in this sequence that give a sense of spontaneity, of following rather than directing the action, and of documenting rather than controlling. When Nana is soliciting help to fix her broken costume, the camera moves from her left to her right between shots and her bra is sometimes on, sometimes off, depending on the shot. Similarly in the shower after swimming, a pan from the shower to the right shows a troubled-looking Karen; the next shot returns to the shower and pans left to reveal

Karen with a similar expression: she has shifted suddenly in position. Panning and tracking shots often include a cut in the middle to almost identical camera positions as though two disparate shots have been united in the editing room to create the illusion of a smooth pan. The apparently ad hoc nature of the filming is emphasised by the amusement and bemusement of onlookers, the inclusion of ostensibly accidental mishaps (Nana's bra breaking and revealing her breasts, Stoffer's erection in the shower) and the frequent blurring which arises when the plane of focus differs from the plane of the action. Conventions such as the 180º rule are ignored, which disorientates, as it is hard to fathom the geographical relationship between different camera positions. These aesthetic choices communicate a sense of the haphazard, the unplanned, the non-artificial; as though camerapeople caught in the middle of the action are capturing events as they occur. This aesthetic is reminiscent of documentaries and home videos, and thus hints at an authenticity in the on-screen acts.

Bainbridge points to the political significance of this aesthetic strategy by arguing that there are "clear parallels" between the Dogme 95 movement and Free Cinema, a British documentary film movement from the 1950s (2007: 90). John Ellis contends that Free Cinema's aim was not to show what 'things really look like but how they really are" (in Bainbridge 2007: 90) and it is Ellis's description which Caroline Bainbridge uses as an introduction to the Dogme 95 movement, especially *The Idiots*. My previous discussion of 'truth' in *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart* should make us wary of the idea of showing things 'how they really are', both because it presumes that there is an ultimate 'truth' that can be revealed, and that revelation can fundamentally change power structures. However in *The Idiots*, acts are shown in numerous ways, opposite opinions are critiqued within scenes, and objects and characters do not occupy a single unchanging space.[24] As such, while the film is confrontational and provocative, there is no

[24] Continuity 'errors' mean that people move around within a scene.

clear political message and no ideas which coalesce into anything that can be considered as a 'truth'.

There are several shots of penetration during a gang-bang sequence towards the end of the film and much general nakedness, which is quite shocking especially given the suddenness with which the children's birthday party becomes an orgy. Unlike *Baise-moi* however, *The Idiots* does not insist on the reality of sex in this depiction of penetration, because the orgy is followed by a relatively conventional sex scene between two of the 'spassers' alone in a bedroom. Close-ups frame their heads as they talk romantically, are awkward, smile a lot, and laugh at their tender moment. As Williams notes, referring to the fact that the female character in this couple, Josephine, may suffer from non-simulated mental-health difficulties, "in the earlier scene the idiots were fake and the sex was real. In this scene, the idiots are real and the sex is simulated" (2001: 20). The 'spassing' and visible penetration are not valorised but nor is the simulation; they are just two ways of depicting sex. Visible sex may fit with the film's provocative, confrontational mode of authenticity but in itself, it does not carry any truth value. A comparable critique is posited against 'spassing' itself.

'Spassing' takes two main forms in *The Idiots*: political and transcendental. Karen, whose entry into the group forms the film's opening, believes in a transcendental aspect to spassing – that it will change her inner being fundamentally – shown when Nana describes Karen as 'gone into spass' when she 'spasses' for the first time, as though it were a religious epiphany. When Karen takes this attempt at insight back to her family home, it is shown to be intolerably cruel to her family who had heard no news from her since her disappearance following her child's death. The others, especially group leader Stoffer, see 'spassing' as a political act which challenges the hypocrisies of bourgeois Danish society. Such a claim is shown to be superficial because it

turns out that none of the 'spassers' are willing to 'spass' outside the safety of their private enclave. When asked to return to where people know them and 'spass' there, they refuse or are unable to do so. While they claim to support the rhetoric, they are unwilling to take a meaningful political step by declaring their belief in 'spassing' in conventional society. Jan Simons points out that the group members only demonstrate the aesthetics of political transgression, concerned more with how well they perform the 'spass' rather than its ability to alter the bourgeois system they claim to be fighting against (2007: 65ff). For the group (Karen excepted), the visibility of their 'spassing' to each other is of paramount importance rather than any transcendent insight or political change to be found in the method. The editing style, continuity 'errors', and the later contradictions in the accounts given in the talking-head interviews in *The Idiots*, lead to a varied and multifaceted concept of truth and authenticity that makes us reflect on the nature of political struggle, class, mental health and sex, without creating a coalescing answer for us to swallow. Visibility in *The Idiots* entails a revealing of erect penises, breasts, dribbled caviar and an intimate authentic sense of a group. It entails some revealing of transgressive moments (sexual modal ambiguities and disgust) that might be considered *exter* but is mainly within the boundaries of conventions, even if its 'documentary aesthetic' is quite unusual within a fiction film, and thus in the territory of *extremus*. It does not however entail a revealing of any sense of 'truth'.

Rather, as Simons notes: "different manipulations of the scenes with anti-Bazinian continuity errors play with any sense of the 'real' being presented and give a 'partial glimpse into the multiple ways the event might have occurred'" (2008: 6).We are encouraged to look beyond the superficial to see alternative interpretations of images that were already known to us. The

perspectives cannot be reconciled into a single 'truthful' version of events.[25] There is no truthful arche-image which can be found by bringing together all the different positions from which a scene has been viewed. Simons suggests that *The Idiots* is "more than the sum of all such separate actualisations because it comprises in principle an open and infinitely large collection of virtual trajectories. […] Film, from this perspective, is not a 'window on reality' but an *interface*" (2007: 77–78). As an interface the film suggests that there are numerous ways to think about the images. The forms of visibility in *The Idiots* provoke us, they confront us with authentic-feeling versions of the people, objects and acts on screen. Such corporeal confrontations, such unpleasant or pleasant reactions, encourage us to look again rather than remaining emotionally distant from what we are watching. In her analysis of *Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais, 1959), Kyo Maclear argues that the limits of vision should produce "a space where contradictions can be maintained without a hastened rush for conclusions or harmony" (2003: 247). *The Idiots* produces no harmony and maintains myriad contradictions, whilst provoking and challenging the spectator to reflect on these irreconcilables.

This discussion of *The Idiots* begins to make clear the relevance of obscurity within this examination of visibility. Our inability to see any aroused genitals during the romantic sex scene and the obscurity of the different interpretations are as important as the visibility of genitals in the gang bang. Just as I have discussed the differences between visibility in brightly lit close-ups or in darker long-shots, I consider obscurity as a 'multiform' concept which "simultaneously conceals and reveals" (White 1981: 2). This second half of the chapter argues that techniques of obscurity communicate authenticity, that they provocatively confront the viewer by addressing them in unpleasant corporeal ways. Such confrontations and provocations amount to an ethical engagement with the spectator who is forcefully encouraged to reflect on and reconsider

[25] In *Elephant* (van Sant, 2003), although we see the stories play out through the eyes of different characters, we understand that the events occurred in one 'truthful' way.

the images put to them, and how they look at images and the acts, events or people that are depicted.

Obscurity

Enlightenment, in the literal sense of making visible, lighting up, is not the only method of advancing knowledge, despite remaining a pervasive and powerful one (Jay 1994). Contemporary scholars emphasise the need to "run against the long-held belief that valuable experience and knowledge must necessarily come as a process of 'enlightenment' that distances us from the unreliable input of sensual perception" (Beugnet 2007: 6). Indeed, as aforementioned, White rails against the predominance of light-based metaphors or etymologies in words designed to indicate positive thought: 'clarity', 'lucidity', 'illumination' (1981: 13). White argues against a linking of "truth, goodness and lucidity" with sunlight and "falsehood, evil and obscurity" with darkness, demanding that we examine questions of obscurity on their own terms (ibid.). Citing Friedrich Schlegel, Anders Olsson even goes as far as to suggest that some aspects of texts will always remain obscure to the reader, and that any respectful reader must always take note of that which remains obscure as well as that which becomes clear in the process of reading: "a qualified critic not only ruminates, he knows that he will never fully digest the text" (2007: 85). Once again this links back to Cooper's Levinasian conception of visual ethics as acknowledging "that others can never be fully comprehended" (2006: 24).

These accounts of obscurity argue firstly that we must interrogate how something is made visible or obscured. By being suspicious of totalising ideas about 'enlightenment' and 'illumination', they ask us to look closely at the assumptions underpinning the ostensibly simple fact of being visible or not. They ask us to challenge the boundaries around 'long-held belief[s]' and

around understandings of 'truth' and 'goodness', in order to better understand the nature of these boundaries and the world which creates them. This is part of what a consideration of *extremus* and *exter* can facilitate. I suggest that obscurity can be a central element in a film's encouragement of the spectator to rethink their views on the world. Secondly the idea that not knowing, not seeing, not claiming to understand, are integral to an honest experience of encountering a text or film speaks to the ethical frameworks set out by Cooper, Silverman and Kuppers. For Cooper, the Levinasian ethical encounter is precisely about the subject's inability "to assimilate what it encounters" (2006: 24). For Silverman, "it is crucial that […] [we] respect the otherness of the newly illuminated bodies" (1996: 2), foreshadowing Olssen's idea of rumination without full digestion. For Kuppers, we must never try to make another person 'fully knowable' (2007: 2), accepting that there remain aspects of someone that are obscure. Not only then is obscurity central to how films such as *Irreversible*, *Sombre* and *A New Life* communicate a sense of authenticity, confront the viewer with images of sex and violence, and provoke them into rethinking how they interpret images, but a degree of obscurity is integral to the ethical framework of new extreme films.

I argued that *A Hole in my Heart* and *Baise-moi* make visible 'objective' violences by turning them into 'subjective' violences. Gillian Beer argues that this way of thinking about visibility was present in nineteenth-century Western science, which, with the invention of the microscope, saw "making things visible, making them emerge […] [as] a means of regaining control" (1996: 87). However, this becomes a valorisation of absolute notions such as 'truth', 'essence' and 'fixity', suggesting that the 'true' version of something can be revealed by making it visible. In contrast, *The Idiots* problematises fixed notions of sex, politics, community and disability by depicting inassimilable versions of events. The films discussed in this half of the chapter adopt a critical stance towards truth and fixity, emphasising the importance of being blurry, out

of the frame, dark or overexposed. Just as modal ambiguities and disgust can elicit bodily reactions, communicating through senses beyond sight, so does obscurity open up space for a valorisation of non-visual senses. The distinction between the visual and extra-visual becomes central to Irigaray's critique of Western philosophy, which she, like Allon White, accuses of being overly focussed on the visual and neglectful of other ways of perceiving the world (1985: 25–26, 117, 147, 179). Not only does Irigaray see this as an impoverishment of the possibilities of our interactions with the world, but she contends that a primary preoccupation with light and images – what she calls photology – is intertwined with phallocentric societal structures (see Vasseleu 1996).

Irigaray's emphasis on extra-visual senses as disruptive to phallocentric ideological structures supports the productive, disruptive status of the ethical framework I have outlined, because the extra-visual engages with the spectator in bodily ways rather than restricting the spectator to an engagement only with the visuals of a film. Moreover, her criticism of the limits of a visual-based interpretation of the world aligns with Beugnet's call for an appreciation of communication methods not traditionally categorised under 'enlightenment' (2007: 6), and White's demand that we do not neglect the powers of obscurity. White argues that texts indulging in obscurity are able to "shift backwards and forwards clinging to the desire for referential fixity and clarity of representation at the same time as dissolving both into the dense *textualité* of metaphor, obscure syntax, broken narrative and anomic subjectivism" (1981: 2). This shifting, dissolving movement between obscurity and clarity enables a destabilisation of fixed and absolute ideas, and the potential for thinking in alternative ways. In terms of extremity, White's quotation makes it clear that this form of obscurity is not about a dissolution into complete darkness or incomprehensible opacity. Rather, while some aspects of new extreme films transgress the boundaries of comprehension with 'broken narratives' and 'anomic subjectivism', they are still

rooted in representation, conventions, fixity and clarity. As such they do not stray into abstract impressions, shapes and colours even as the images of *A New Life* and *Sombre* are often not understandable as realistic human depictions or recognisable places. Their unconventional and difficult-to-see images place them in *extremus* as far as aesthetic conventions go, but it is only at certain moments that this slips into an *exter*.

The idea that films such as *Sombre* and *A New Life* fall between conventionally aesthetic or narrative structures and abstract experimental artworks underpins Beugnet's analysis of the 'cinema of sensation'. She calls for a 'third path' between hermeneutics and erotics (see introduction), where our responses to the film's images are both cognitive and sensorial, intellectual and visceral. According to Beugnet, this 'third path' enables a multifaceted appreciation of filmed subjects and points to a way of identifying "with the material aspect and transformations of the film body itself above identification with its figurative and narrative content," (2007: 6), which Thomas Morsch later calls 'bodily perception' (2011) in reference to how a film's images elude elements of visual perception and affectively act upon the spectator's body. This is another way in which new extreme films "expand the domain of aesthetics […] transcend[ing] the threshold of the visible world" (Grønstad 2012: 10). Earlier, such an expansion was conceived in terms of an expansion of available images of sex. Here, the visible world is expanded in the sense that we are encouraged to look beyond the visible world in order to appreciate the images on-screen.

Importantly, this approach entails changing the often judgmental attitude voiced towards films which act upon our bodies (see Williams 1991). Beugnet argues against seeing shock in these films as "an aim and end in itself and the voyeuristic harnessing of the effect of verisimilitude

towards the pornographic accumulation of 'realist' images" (2007: 24). Rather, films employing obscurity by developing affective, material engagements with the spectator, encourage an appreciation of materiality, texture and touch. Far from being a denigration of vision, considering images in this way appreciates the possibilities which arise at the limits of visibility, when images elude vision, make it difficult to see, or encourage the spectator to engage corporeally with the images. I return to materiality in greater detail in chapter 3 but in terms of visibility, Beugnet suggests how these expansions of the visible world can be seen as positive and productive rather than negative and gratuitous. Morsch suggests we conceive of such aesthetics not as a loss of distance, but as a gain in physicality. Criticising work on the 'body genres' for focussing overly on loss, he argues: "when it is the body that is addressed, people talk of a *loss* of sovereignty and of the subject's autonomy, of the *loss* of aesthetic distance and the capacity to judge, rather than a *gain* in corporeality and somatic intensity" (2008: 10). Similarly, citing Sobchack, Beugnet argues that "certain films offer us, then, an intuition of a state of flux in which the dissolution of the self in materiality is no longer simply destructive but also a 'sensual and sensitive extension of our selves'" (2010: 68). These gains or extensions, which formulate a different conceptualisation of film, are primarily achieved by *not* making images conventionally visible, in *not* focussing on the visual as the primary mode of engagement with the images. The gains in somatic intensity or bodily affect we see in *Sombre, A New Life* and *Irreversible* are therefore directly linked to how images are obscured and (not) made visible.

Not only can this expansion of the visible world be seen in terms of an increase in affect, but also in a reinterpretation of grainy, blurry or overexposed images (amongst other obscurings). Ludwig Wittgenstein asks "is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need" (1986: 34/§71). Such a question can be understood as fundamental to many scholars' positive analyses of new extreme films,

especially *Sombre* and *A New Life*. Daniel Frampton suggests that the obscure, non-visually-secure image is an example of film's capacity to think thoughts that cannot be communicated by other forms of thought such as written philosophy:

> the defocused, the willed intended blur, is a pure example of film's neothoughtfulness, creating images that we could not ourselves generate. On seeing the 1921 film *El Dorado* by Marcel L'Herbier, Jean Epstein wrote of a fandango scene: 'By means of soft focus which becomes progressively intensified, the dancers gradually lose their differentiations, cease to be recognisable as individuals, become merged in a common visual term: the dancer'. (Frampton 2007: 123)

Rather than dismissing the blurred image as evidence of poor filmmaking, or easily linkable to a character's inability to see (they need glasses), Frampton analyses the blurred image's philosophical import and aesthetic meaning outside of obvious narrative concerns much like scholars would analyse any visible image. Moreover, he suggests that it can communicate something about the dancer that the clear image cannot: it is not a lesser version of a clear arche-image but a meaningful image in itself.

Morsch puts forward a comparable argument in his discussion of the indirect image: referring to a scene in *Sombre* where the protagonist's presence is signalled only by the reactions of those watching him, Morsch argues that "through the shot of the human face, the image gives expression to a power, an intensity, a feeling which eludes direct recording" (2011: 299). For Morsch it is precisely in *not* making the man visible that the affective intensity of his presence is increased. For scholars such as Frampton, this expansion of the visible world takes place to the extent that a film is able to unleash itself from representation and "enact[] *its own version* of franticness and paranoia" (2007: 47). Conceiving of film in this way, Marc Mercier notes in

relation to *A New Life*: "[the camera] does not film cruelty, it is cruelty. It doesn't film the fall, it is vertigo. It doesn't record suffering, it is the scream. It doesn't film bodies, it is the flesh itself: murdered, wounded, ripped out" (2005: 55). The images are no longer indirect capturings of the physical external consequence of emotions and moods, but become those emotions. Moreover, if a viewer can describe a film as cruelty, vertigo, a scream, murdered flesh itself, it demonstrates the confrontational and provocative nature of these images, because these emotions are being directed at the spectator, already corporeally affected by these images and struggling to distance themselves from the depicted acts. The obscurity of these images is central to their being so intense and through these confrontations and provocations to their operating according to the particular ethical framework of new extreme films. This way of engaging with the spectator is able to destabilise how we conceive of violence, of sex, of Eastern Europe, of prostitution, and make us see these subjects in a new light.

Subjective Authenticity – *Irreversible*

Having thought so much about modal ambiguities in terms of visibility, we must examine how making the image obscure can also evoke authenticity. *Irreversible* is told in reverse chronological order with the last scene of the story being shown first and then progressing backwards towards the beginning of the story. We first see a long descent into an underground club which ends with a man being murdered with a fire extinguisher. We then see the temporal precursors to this act with the protagonist, Marcus, violently trying to find 'Tapeworm'. In the pivotal central scene, Alex, Marcus's girlfriend, is raped in an underpass. We then see the events leading up to the rape, moving backwards in time to a sex scene between Marcus and Alex where it is revealed that Alex is pregnant. The opening scene features slanted, swinging and rotating frames, fast-moving overhead tracking shots, and plunges through walls, ceilings, and floors,

accompanied by a bass drone which ebbs and flows, and a disconcerting red-lit environment. As Marcus descends into the club, the camera swoops around, showing dark, grainy glimpses of fucking, sucking and whipping, drug-addled masturbation, dangling chains and gangbang boudoirs. This is all shown in a single take with the camera sometimes behind, sometimes in front of Marcus; the camera is constantly rotating, although the direction of the rotation changes and the rooms off the corridor, which we descend during much of this scene, are shown in quick pans to the side, which we quickly recognise as representing Marcus's searching. The spectator is disoriented as people appear sideways, upside down, twisting around, out of focus, entering and leaving the frame. The camera also dollies in towards Marcus and other people as well as dollying out again meaning that we are never at a stable distance from what we are watching, moving constantly between medium close-ups and close-ups. The lighting is not bright (the club is underground) and most of the lights are red; the lack of light and the camera's proximity to Marcus means that light is often blocked from the camera and the image goes almost black. The soundtrack consists of a low siren-like sound which increases and decreases in volume and forms the background to the sounds of whips cracking, men moaning, buttocks being slapped, and Marcus's increasingly agitated discussions with his friend Pierre. The cinematography is affectively disorientating: with no obvious cuts, no reverse shots, no contextualising shots, no character introductions, and general difficulties with seeing and hearing images and sounds. The push and pull between what we can and cannot see leaves us disoriented and made my eyes ache as I tried to focus on visible people and objects being swept out of the frame or covered in shadow.

While we should avoid drawing easy parallels between cinematic style and a character's interior thoughts, numerous comparisons can be made which suggest the camera is communicating

some of Marcus's feelings rather than just recording his outward manifestations of those feelings. Just as Marcus runs around an unknown dark place searching for something, so is the image dark, leaves many areas unlit, and swings around, getting suddenly close to strangers. Just as Marcus is out of control, has lost his temper and is angry, so the image is depicted at rotated angles, is at different heights when looking at the characters, and sometimes follows Marcus, sometimes precedes him, sometimes leaves him outside the frame. Just as he is being hassled by different people and emotions, his anger flaring up and then subsiding, so does the soundtrack get louder and quieter, becoming more insistent as Marcus descends into the club. Just as Marcus is emotionally overwhelmed by the situation and whatever has led to his aggressive pursuit of 'Tapeworm', so is there is "a subterranean barrage of off-screen and non-diegetic sound peaks and ebbs in aural waves, an arresting but dislocated clamour that interrogates the events we see […] we approach sensory overload, sheer aural chaos" (Palmer 2006: 29). The sense of disorientation, of discomfort and danger enters our ears and our viscera as the infrasonic sounds (28 Hz) layered into the bass notes literally make you nauseous (see Tandy and Lawrence 1998; Angliss 2009); the droning gnaws its way inside your head and you feel dizzy and uncertain from the sound alone. Sound is not only unclear and obscure, but it gets under our skin, grinding away at our ability to distance ourselves from the images. The difficulty of seeing what is going on and the overwhelming visual and aural field are what make this scene so viscerally challenging. There is a sense that rather than watching Marcus's travails from a distance, we are being opened to an experience of Marcus's emotional state.

Being exposed to an authentic sense of Marcus's emotional state does not, however, justify his subsequent actions. His assaults and abuse of strangers are irrational and uncontrolled, while his aggressive reaction to his friend's attempts to help him seems childish. We must remember that this scene takes place at the beginning of the film and so the spectator is thrown into this

violent, angry, disorienting world without any idea about the backstory to Marcus's aggression: we are confronted with a barrage of unmotivated and yet brutally destructive violence. The scene progresses in an ostensible single take, following Marcus and Pierre down into the depths of the club. As Marcus thinks he has found 'Tapeworm', a fight breaks out and Marcus is overwhelmed and pinned to the floor; the camera still moves about but has slowed down significantly so that Marcus and his adversary are constantly visible within the less mobile frame. The noise on the soundtrack has remained the same grinding siren-like sound but now has an increased intensity and is accompanied by the cheers of a crowd gathered to watch. The camera adopts a non-rotating but quick-moving handheld style for the fight; as Marcus is pinned to the floor it moves into a medium close-up and almost stops moving. Marcus's left arm is visible in the foreground as his adversary uses his knee to snap Marcus's forearm back on itself, an act which made me jump in shock, before the man pulls down his trousers to rape Marcus. Behind them, a man masturbates wildly, his penis visible, reiterating the importance of modal ambiguities in this disorienting scene. Suddenly Pierre appears with a fire extinguisher which is slammed into the assailant's head, knocking him over. I felt relief at this point, thinking that the scene was finally over. However we then see in barely moving medium close-up, Pierre repeatedly smashing the extinguisher into the man's head as he lies prone, barely alive on the floor. What we can see is central to the challenge of watching this last minute of footage: the man's mouth, eyes and cheek still move slightly even as they are destroyed by each further blow, all shown clearly in medium close-up. The image rotates twice towards the end but remains generally along one plane.

Unlike in *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart*, this scene does not demonstrate the hidden violences of society, but refuses to obscure the destructive horror of vengeful violence. We are not allowed to feel secure and safe after Marcus is saved from the nameless attacker, but must

watch as the character we considered more sensible kills a man for no justifiable reason (as far as we know). While the first blow was to save Marcus from being raped, all further blows are mindless, if passionate, violence and we are forced to watch them in all their bone-crunching destruction. Narrative does not save us from the confrontational images of violence because we only discover later the motivation of revenge. Violence is shown to be brutal and nasty, destructive and inhuman, whatever the reason. The pointlessness of it all is shown at the end of the scene as the camera pans across to the murder victim's friend who is smiling, suggesting that the victim may not even have been their intended 'Tapeworm'.

This scene from *Irreversible* uses techniques of making visible and obscuring the events in order to communicate a more authentic feeling of the characters' emotions and of the acts taking place. We may know that Vincent Cassel (Marcus) did not have his arm broken and that an actor did not have his face beaten to a pulp, but this does not stop the images having a disturbing, visceral effect on us. We are enveloped in a world of violence and encouraged to see that violence is nasty, destructive and ignoble. It is not prettified or justified as in many stories of revenge, and it might make us think again about how accepting we are of horrible depictions of deplorable violence, about how much pleasure we should take in such depictions. I return to these issues again in chapter 4 when looking at duration in *Irreversible*, where I look closely at the film's disquieting politics, but it is important to make a point here about the homophobia of this scene.

All of the gay members of this club are presented in a negative way: as either too drug-addled to talk, too sex-crazed to care, or as a baying crowd of rapist thugs. Moreover, the place which represents the darkest, most immoral depths of hell, whose descending underground tunnelling makes a less-than-subtle reference to Dante's circles of hell, is a gay S/M club, that is, a place

where people with non-normative sexualities undertake non-normative sexual practices. As Best and Crowley argue, in *Irreversible*, anality becomes "a profoundly homophobic vision of hell," as the "absolute negation of the happy futurity of heterosexual vaginal penetration" (2007: 112). This nightmarish early scene depicting the violence of non-normative sexual pleasure, and the central (anal) rape scene, are contrasted with the bucolic happiness of the film's penultimate scene of monogamous, heterosexual, vaginal sex. While *Irreversible* does make a powerful plaidoyer for rethinking violence, this scene in particular, and the film in general, cannot be separated from a "reductively homophobic mainstream imaginary, and its axiomatic heteronormativity" (ibid.).

Exaggeration – *A New Life*

Sombre and *A New Life* also depict situations that appear frequently in mainstream films, but where the violence and sexuality is often underplayed, justified, or elided such as sexualised murder, strip clubs, brothels and people trafficking. Both these films have attracted adulatory attention from scholars because of their attention to sensation, materiality and the body. They use techniques such as reduced frame rate, out of focus shots, minimal lighting and infra-red cameras, which stand out from a mainstream feature film, in order to evoke these affects. The films do however contain sufficient narrative-film elements that they are not considered to be experimental visual artworks for museum exhibition: roughly legible chronology, a focus on a few recognisable characters, development of a storyline between these characters, disruptions to the beginning equilibrium necessitating change, and action towards a new equilibrium. While many images, ideas, characters and narrative elements are obscured, there remain numerous conventional parts of the films. They both go beyond the narrative film conventions

(*exter*) and remain inside, if still at some distance from the conventional feature film (*extremus*). This last part of the chapter will examine the techniques of obscurity and visibility used to convey authenticity, to confront and provoke the spectator, first in *A New Life* and then in *Sombre*. Although *Sombre* was made before *A New Life*, I examine *A New Life* first because my analysis of its politics has links to my points about *Irreversible* as a film which exaggerates the effects and destruction of violence to highlight these elements in other films. Secondly, I look closely at how *Sombre* approaches fixity, truths and essences to examine it as a counterpoint to other films discussed in this chapter.

A New Life is a film about people trafficking, sexual slavery and brothels set ostensibly somewhere in Eastern Europe. The narrative focuses mainly on Seymour (an American seeking sex), Mélania (a trafficked sex worker) and Boyan (a people trafficker). Obscurity is a key element from the beginning of the film: on a black background, the title shakes unnervingly, already resisting clarity. The opening image is an unspecified location, seemingly at night, and shows, in long shot, a group of people in thick coats walking towards the camera. The image is out of focus and most of the frame is enveloped in black so the group are only blurred shapes at the bottom of the screen. This cuts to a shaking closer shot of the group. Getting closer we realise that the images are sped up significantly and the frame rate has been reduced. Together these make the people wobble (a movement so slow we would not notice at standard running speed) and the image shake (the reduced frame rate precluding the smooth flowing of the images we see at 24 frames per second). The camera dollies into a close-up of a woman's face staring into the distance behind the camera. This wobbling, shaking dolly-in is repeated with other women, each of the shots being around forty seconds in length. Subsequently, a cut shows two men wandering across a field in blurry long shot, the camera panning left to capture their trajectory. Very little is visible in these opening shots with the darkness of the night, the limited access to

the people we see, except certain features – a blink, a tear – on those we see in close-up. From the start of the film, the film's subjects are obscured despite the camera getting physically close to them. As Michael Goddard suggests, "all our attention is focussed on these unnamed faces that plunge us into a world of bodies and sensations, before things are named or identified" (2011: 86). Indeed an attempt to get closer to the characters without ever suggesting we can 'know' them characterises the whole film: the group in the opening shot are never seen again and one of the men wandering across the blurred field turns out to be our protagonist. The shaky images are unpleasant to watch, making your eyes strain, just like we strain to see clarity in the blurred images. These difficulties of watching, of discerning what images might represent, and of gaining any meaningful knowledge about the characters from such images, pervade *A New Life*.

As well as these obscuring techniques, *A New Life* contains several deeply unpleasant scenes of violence. Mélania is purchased twice during the film for aggressive sexual encounters. One is with Seymour who treats her like a rag-doll, only getting an erection when physically controlling her and not when she tries to stimulate him herself. Another is with a Frenchman immediately after Seymour, where he takes sexual pleasure in terrifying Mélania. In the final climactic sequence, Seymour seems about to engage in consensual pleasurable sex with a dancer, when in medium close-up, he pins her front-down on a table and rapes her. She whimpers in pain as the camera swings to the side; Seymour repeatedly shouts 'shut up' while grabbing her hair with both hands. He then starts punching her back, the sound of which is loud and brutal. Suddenly she is on her back, still being raped in medium close-up. He pushes her head away after climaxing and walks away. The camera stays focussed on her face. Within the logic of the film, there can be no relations between men and women that are not based on control, coercion and the infliction of pain. In this scene the sound of Seymour's fists on her back are

used to emphasise the violence of the encounter, and his screams of 'shut up' are piercing, making visible the power structures of the rape and of the brothel. The scene may have begun sexily but it was never about sex or pleasure, only violence and power. Sound is used unpleasantly in another scene earlier in the film. In the scene in which Boyan cuts Mélania's hair, amplified close-miked sounds of a blade against hair together with the shaky, hovering, out-of-focus images of the 'haircut' invade your body and make you shiver in disgust and displeasure with each stroke of the knife along her hair. As Chamarette notes,

> As he pulls the blade along each handful of hair, the close-miked sound reveals an extraordinarily acute and nauseating grating of the blade: it is a sound that penetrates the viewer's body, and its visceral power continues to penetrate my body, unwillingly, even after repeated viewings. (Chamarette 2013: 198)

This penetration from the sounds as well as the dizzying, blurry close-ups which accompany the sounds is made even more potent by the lack of narrative clarity, and the long duration of this scene, which gives us little else to focus on except the painful cutting of hair from the body. Citing Sobchack, Beugnet argues that such images bring out: "the 'intertwined and reversible structure' of body and world; indifference, detachment, are thus offset by sensual empathy and embodiment – the inscription of that which is other, distant, unrelated into the subjective space, onto the body" (2007: 58). The obscurity and unclarity of images and sound serve to invite a sensual interaction with the characters' bodies and situations, whilst, as Beugnet's quotation makes clear, that person remains other, distant, even as we come close to their bodies. At the same time, the more conventional images of rape described above give a sense of the bodily impact of the violence and direct us towards the woman's suffering (the final close-up) without giving any suggestion of empathising with her or understanding how she feels. These visible

and obscured images explain how critics like Mercier can contend that "it doesn't record suffering, it is the scream" (2005: 55). The character's suffering is important but these images are as much about the uncomfortable viewing experience of the spectator and the need for them to look again at people trafficking, sexual slavery and rape, as they are about the character's discomfort.

This confrontational approach to the spectator is analysed by Goddard to argue that *A New Life* makes a complex political argument. Following Beugnet who sees *A New Life* as "destabilising normal patterns of perception," (2007: 31), Goddard suggests we should add to this interpretation "a geopolitical and biopolitical dimension in which the film becomes the expression, not of European political reality as such but rather its political unconscious: the cruel desires that animate it through economies, not only of money and objects, but also of human bodies" (2011: 88). For Goddard, the undercurrent structures of power in Eastern Europe are made visible in *A New Life*. He argues that the West has generally excluded and banished Eastern Europe from its concept of Europe. He follows Marina Gržinić in arguing that this can be countered not by trying to escape this designation, but through a "strategy of adopting the place of exclusion and abjection projected on to the East by the West, by becoming the very surplus Europe that the West tries to banish from its borders, what Gržinić refers to as the Eastern European 'piece of shit' […] an 'excremental remainder'" (2011: 84). On the one hand, this sounds similar to my analysis of *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart*, with the invisible systemic violences of geopolitical power structures being made visible and then used to confront the spectator in order to make them look differently at Eastern Europe, a place they thought they knew and could define. On the other hand, if it is the Western conception of Eastern Europe that is being revealed rather than a more 'truthful' version of Eastern Europe, *A New Life* also avoids some of the Foucauldian criticisms levelled at *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart*. I cite Goddard as a

demonstration of how other scholars have interpreted *A New Life* in a way that corresponds to the confrontational ethical framework I propose, without necessarily formulating it in my terms. Goddard's recourse to shit and exaggeration emphasise the importance of affective reactions such as disgust and the pushing towards limits in order to make something visible.

Nonetheless this argument and indeed *A New Life* are troubling. In Goddard's account, Gržinić's ideas are a way for Eastern Europe to reclaim the insults of the West and turn them to their advantage, and yet *A New Life* is a French film made with French and American actors in most of the main roles. This seems to undermine the idea of Eastern European re-empowerment. Secondly, Goddard seeks to separate *A New Life*'s depiction of Eastern Europe as primitive and clichéd from the *exploitatively* primitive and clichéd depictions of Eastern Europe in *Hostel*. While I do not dispute Goddard's claims that the depictions differ greatly in complexity even if they are ostensibly similar, we must be wary of claiming that *A New Life* is therefore not repeating retrogressive clichés about Eastern Europe. Moreover, we must not let such a reincorporation of *A New Life*'s retrogressive images blind us to the other problematic aspects of the film's depictions, especially of women.

In *A New Life*, Mélania is placed in an unambiguous position of spectacle object both diegetically for the lustful Seymour and for the film spectator. Our gaze is never aligned with hers but often with Seymour's or Boyan's, and our gaze often falls upon beautifully filmed images of her, often in close-up, fragmenting her body into breasts, hands and legs. For instance, in the first scene in which we see Mélania on stage, the shots are only of details of her body: first her breast, then her hand, followed by her shoes and her legs, then her midriff, Seymour's face in her breasts and a shot of her bare back. Moreover, she is in a place where men leer at women for sale, a point emphasised by reverse shots of Seymour as he watches, and the clear gender

divide between the scantily clad women higher up on stage and the fully clothed men drinking in the anonymising darkness below. Finally, the objectification of Mélania, even if she is fully clothed and given an individual identity denied to all other women in the film, is encouraged by the close-up images of the naked bodies of the pole-dancers on stage, whose faces are often hidden by darkness or outside the frame and we see for many minutes before Mélania makes her entrance. These women are made into sensuous, lithe, beautiful dancers, their plump and youthful features a marvel for greedy male eyes while the languid, fluid shots of Mélania's meeting with Seymour, apart from suggesting a romantic rather than a financial relationship, emphasise Mélania's beauty and attractive body. Such an aestheticisation of squalor and ignominy, far from making conceptual violence or the 'realities' of human trafficking visible, tends to legitimise the atrocious conditions Mélania experiences and undermines any political attempt to raise awareness, insight pity or bring about change in her situation. A similar argument can be made for other scenes featuring Mélania, such as the visually breath-taking scene of her dancing with Boyan. We are made to feel the sweeps of her body as the fast-motion shots of her spinning send her into a blur of colour. We might argue that this is a demonstration of his power over her as she is made to spin round again and again, but rendering sexual slaves beautiful as they are controlled by their masters seems just as exploitative as the films from which Goddard wants to distinguish *A New Life*.

Plural perspectives – *Sombre*

Sombre has a similarly problematic relation to images of women, but also opens up interesting questions about visibility and obscurity when we think about the access we gain to the film's characters. *Sombre* follows Jean, a travelling puppeteer who performs for children and also

kills prostitutes. He meets Claire, a virgin, who is fascinated by him and their paths cross several times during the film. People, objects and acts are often obscured from view in *Sombre*, and it is often difficult to see diegetic events because of low lighting, out-of-focus images, or objects blocking our view. In the first murder scene the image is dark from the start, with Jean visible in medium close-up. The camera follows him as he stands up but his face is blurred; the camera stops moving as it focuses on the back of his neck. Cutting to a two-shot of him and a woman, his hands just visible on her face, the camera moves so that a blurred shot of Jean's neck blocks our view of the woman. Another cut reveals her to be naked, which was not clear before. The scene develops with a similar dark blurred aesthetic, faces and body parts obscured by the other person. As the sexual manoeuvres turn violent and he stuffs his fingers into her mouth, the image goes black for a moment and only the noise tells us that she is being hurt. A blurred close-up shows the woman's flailing limbs. The scene ends with a blurred close-up on Jean's hands and a very dark shot of him standing in the corner of the room, his hand twitching.

We come physically close to the characters, are often between them and get close-ups of their skin; but the darkness and blurring block our access to the events. We must guess at much of what is happening. The acts taking place are graphic, erotic and violent but direct views are always elided and sidestepped. It feels as though we are there with them: the room is dark so we cannot see much, they struggle and fight, so things are visually confusing for us as they are for them. As with the opening of *Irreversible*, we cannot draw any firm connections between the aesthetic and the emotions of the characters but we can see resemblances between the confusing, dark, unclear aesthetic and the confusing, unclear motives of Jean, the confused reactions of the sex worker and the dark room. As discussed in relation to *A New Life*, this aesthetic evokes sensations before representative meaning and speaks to emotions – fear, vulnerability, uncertainty, anger – rather than logical, rational explanations. As Beugnet remarks, *Sombre*

evokes “the inherent vulnerability of the self,” an evocation that is “irretrievably enmeshed in the very texture of the images and sound” (2007: 7). The manner of obscuring these images confronts us with the sensations of this situation, with its emotions, but without giving us any knowledge about the characters being filmed. We are brought close, but there is no ‘truth’ to be discovered here, nothing fundamental to be said about murder, serial killers or coercive sexual encounters.

Indeed the absence of clear insights into *Sombre*’s characters is startling, not just in terms of the visibility of their faces, but in the sense of the characters developing into fully fleshed-out humans. Greg Hainge goes as far as to say that we should disregard the representative qualities of the images entirely seeing any links to real people or places as aesthetic elements (2007: 19). Less radically, but still arguing that Jean and Claire in *Sombre* cannot be classified as characters, Chamarette argues that in Philippe Grandrieux’s films, “the very possibility of a self-owned body subject is undone in the fearsome exposure and subjugation of bodies” (2013: 193). It is noticeable, however, that any insights scholars identify in these personages are often framed in terms of literal visibility or obscurity: quoting Sobchack, Beugnet describes “the human form [a]s endlessly confronted with […] the *opacity* of the material” (2007: 114); while for Chamarette, Claire’s “dissolution into lightness” in the prepenultimate scene and Jean’s “descent into darkness” in the penultimate scene are especially meaningful for understanding the morality of the film, described as “an exposure of the darkness of humanity” (2013: 226). Let us therefore consider the different opacities and visibilities of Jean and Claire in order to see how *Sombre* approaches the question of ‘truth’.

Jean never coalesces into a clear character, a particular person that lurks behind his different acts. We see his performances for children on several occasions and this is referred to again

through his wolf costume in his hotel room, possibly a show prop. This performer-Jean remains however separate from killer-Jean, the killings never being linked to his work with children. There is kind-Jean who stops during a thunderstorm to help a stranded motorist (Claire) and does not kill her. There is angry-Jean who fights other men in a jealous tussle over a woman (also Claire). At times there seems to be no connection between these different characters all played by the same actor, but they sometimes leak into one another, such as when Jean attacks Claire's sister in front of Claire. Jean is an archetype, he is different stereotypes but not a genuine person: he is a sullen loner connecting with children via play where he cannot connect with adults; he views women in a virgin/whore dichotomy and enacts the commensurate fatherly-protection/misogynistic-appropriation dichotomy; he is the moody animalistic drunk sparring for mating rights over the female. The images of Jean become evocations of different possible Jeans but with no clear indication of who or what Jean is. The way Jean and his character are made visible and obscure suggest a similarity to Simon's reading of *The Idiots*: rather than a 'window' onto a 'reality' of Jean, we have a "large collection of virtual trajectories", an 'interface' with various possibilities of a person (2007: 77–78). While *Sombre* confronts and provokes us with its images, it remains inscrutable and forces us to think about the nature of the characters and the reasons for their actions, because the film does not provide any.

Claire is similarly archetypal: as the motherly virgin who comforts and is sexually fascinated by Jean, she is a form of patriarchal fantasy (innocent and pure virgin/mother, deflowered virgin, rape fantasist who 'secretly wants to be taken brutally'). She is also a troubled child,[26] naïve about the dangers of the adult world and dreaming innocently of escaping. When hitchhiking, with a passing woman, she becomes Jean's long-suffering partner and the woman's

[26] With her flowery dress, she somewhat resembles the troubled Karen in *The Idiots*.

subsequent tale of lost love in response to Claire's purported marriage woes is predicated on this idea of Jean as a lousy husband, fumbled together by Claire.

At the same time as we are denied any coalescing ideas about the film's characters, we are brought physically close to them and gain a sense of vulnerability, fear and discomfort but also passion, excitement and even romance. There is something tender, intimately personal, and human in Jean and Claire's copulation on the side of the road. A 68-second shot shows Claire unfurling Jean's frozen hand against her breast and they fall, in close-up, back onto the hard ground. His fingers in her mouth remind us of the film's opening murder but these fingers are grasped by Claire as she ecstatically breathes in their smell. Their fumble to remove their clothes is filmed in short blurry close-ups which move between body parts, looking through the gaps between them, and never settling, remaining close to the bodies, seemingly in between them. The sex is filmed by showing only their heads in several long takes, always in close-up, the plane of focus shifting between the two lovers but mainly falling on Claire as the camera is positioned just over Jean's shoulder. Both shudder, emitting shocked sighs and moans, staring intently into each other's eyes as Jean strokes Claire's cheek. Claire has always seemed prepubescently asexual thus far, while Jean's passions have always been enacted through violence. Their shudders, the evocation of hand on cheek and their engagement in an act which they do not undertake with others (Claire was a virgin, Jean kills rather than copulating) suggests an authentic, vulnerable intimacy to their encounter. We feel we have been given an insight into some more profound aspect of their hidden desires. Yet the intimacy is suddenly lost as Jean drags Claire onto the road, forcing the woman to accept her as a hitchhiker, at which point a new version of Claire and Jean as a couple is invented and we realise that any insight we thought we had was just another virtuality, no more meaningful than any other. As Beugnet, concludes, citing Raymond Bellour, "Grandrieux's films […] capture this impossibility of the

image to form with any clarity and lasting truth […] putting the customary coherence of the screen image out of joint" (2005: 183). The film's confrontational address should not be seen as illuminating some form of 'truth' or 'essence' as some commentators claim, but rather leaves open, unsolved and unanswered the question of what the viewer should think; we are encouraged to reconsider, to rethink, but not to think anything specific.

Marcus Stiglegger suggests viewers of *A New Life* approach "*an essence* of that which narrative cinema can only circumscribe: *a pure corporeality, a primal fear, the existential*" (2012: 52 emphasis added); Goddard argues that *A New Life* evokes Eastern Europe's 'political unconscious' (2011: 88); while Morsch describes a 'pure image' or an 'originary condition of visuality' (2011: 297, 298), an alternative reality exposed by *A New Life*: "here a *different* reality to the physical world is brought into focus; the images do not grasp physical reality, but rather the other reality of imperceptible affect" (2011: 300). For Morsch, it is as though an underlying reality (corollary to the violence of pornography in *A Hole in my Heart* or the violence of patriarchy in *Baise-moi*) is exposed by Grandrieux, a truthful way of understanding the world. Indeed when considering the visibility of extremity and the unpleasantness of many of *Sombre*'s and *A New Life*'s scenes, Beugnet, cites Grandrieux as professing to refuse "a cinema that shields the viewer from the more disturbing, and thus ignores the most crucial, dimension of human reality" (2005: 176), thus suggesting that some form of reality will be revealed when Grandrieux removes this shield. Along such a reading, the removal of visual shields to extremity will reveal some incontrovertible fact about serial killers or about the slave trade. However, given the complexities of Grandrieux's manipulation of visibility and the obfuscations that litter his images, it is reductive to see his films as an opening up onto an absolute reality unattainable through narrative films. Instead, we should consider the experience of watching *Som-*

bre and *A New Life* as operating at "the limits of knowability," where "the possibility of uncertainty, dissensus and the limits of what can be grasped filmically" (Chamarette 2013: 188) reign over the certainty and consensus of essences or truths. It is the way that "the inchoate hubbub" and the lack of "customary coherence" (Beugnet 2005: 183) unsettle us and demand that we both rethink the images and cogitate on them long after the film ends, that renders the films so powerful. To seek to reduce them to an 'essence' or a 'political unconscious' is to control and delimit the confrontational ethics, rather than accepting the films as problematic, disturbing, exciting and powerful.

Nonetheless, as Chamarette suggests (2011: 80), we cannot dismiss audience anger at the aestheticised spectacles of sexual violence, nor the dehumanising presentation of so many characters. We must take into account all aspects of new extreme films rather than focussing on positive ethical possibilities and disregarding retrogressive political elements. I disagree with Hainge and Grandrieux himself when they suggest that "morality simply has no place here" (Hainge 2007: 20) because morality in these films is akin to the morality of actions in a dream (Grandrieux 1999). Grandrieux may primarily be interested in form, ground, sensation and inner drives (Hainge 2007: 20–21), but the choice to use sex and violence to explore these still has moral and ethical significance. These images add to the totality of images of serial killers and sexual violence in films and therefore do not escape morality just because the filmmaker is uninterested in morality. To draw on Hawkins (2000: 196), who is allowed to determine when sexual violence is a metaphor or not? Images of sexual violence are deeply problematic and must be examined in terms of morality like any other image.

Like *A New Life*, *Sombre* repeatedly presents images of aestheticised violence against women. Moreover, while the first murder is shocking for its sensational envelopment of the spectator

in the erotics of controlling sex and fatal violence, we experience several more images of such violence against women, which normalise these images and lead us to expect more misogynistic sexual violence rather than attuning us to its horror. Like the morally suspect narrative of *Murder-Set-Pieces*, we follow a sullen single man as he manipulates, exploits and kills women with whom we have little emotional connection, because we see images of them only moments before they are sexually assaulted and killed. The women become interchangeable, identityless pieces of meat: we are encouraged not only to feel some of the sensations of Jean's attacks but to share his viewpoint, a viewpoint which is far from critiqued in the narrative. As Olivier Joyard remarks about *A New Life* in a comment relevant for the sexual violence of *Sombre*: "it's unbelievable but it's like this: rape is a trashy, chic experience, a trendy aesthetic loop-the-loop" (2002: 11). That this is the case is deeply problematic, demonstrating the split politics of a film such as *Sombre*.

New extreme visibility

This chapter demonstrates the importance to new extreme films of visibility and obscurity. I have shown how making visible and obscuring can evoke authenticity through modal ambiguities, visceral affect, a documentary aesthetic, disorientation and a lack of clarity. Visibility and obscurity were shown to operate according to the principle of *extremus* and *exter*: new extreme films make provocative, shocking and unconventional images visible (*exter*) but nonetheless, most of a film's images are within the boundaries of acceptability, even if aesthetics, morality, and the challenging film-watching experience are far from the norm (*extremus*). Sex, surgery, vomit, rape, murder and overeating are shown in clear detail while other scenes are dark, blurry, shaky or distanced, forcing us examine the screen closely for information. Mixing visibility and obscurity can create an enveloping experience of a character's emotions. We are provoked

into considering the material, physical aspects of sex and violence, whilst not feeling that we 'know' the character(s) or can assimilate their experiences into our own. Confronted with alternative aspects of commonly depicted acts, we are encouraged to rethink how we conceptualise them and images of them. The visibility or obscurity of the acts provokes visceral, affective reactions which are central to our reconsideration of the depicted acts. In several cases, the visibility of sex or violence makes visible power structures which conventionally govern those acts, and make alternative interpretations of sex and violence visible to the spectator.

In *Baise-moi*, we are encouraged to rethink the violences of patriarchal society, the physical invasions which characterise rape, the gendered assumptions which dominate thinking about sex; *A Hole in my Heart* uses comparable techniques to evoke the structural violences of pornography. *The Idiots* asks us to reconsider disability, sex, community and political protest through myriad alternatives of these concepts. *Irreversible* envelops the spectator in its whirlwind of visibility and obscurity, overwhelming us with a character's emotions and the pointless brutality of vengeful violence. *A New Life* and *Sombre* use obscurity to evoke the sensations and emotions of characters involved in murder, sex, people trafficking and rape, whilst never allowing the characters to coalesce into conventionally comprehensible human figures. Nonetheless, these films demonstrate an investment in retrogressive ideologies, with *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart* claiming to make visible the 'essence' or 'truth' of the female condition and pornography, respectively; *Irreversible* shows itself to be inescapably homophobic; and both *Sombre* and *A New Life* demonstrate a chauvinistic disregard for the subjectivities of their female characters. Visibility and obscurity are integral to new extreme films' ethical framework, to opening up alternative perspectives on sex, women, pornography, rape, community, revenge, murder and trafficking. However, such progressive ideas are closely linked to retrogressive political perspectives and the problematic re-imposition of 'essence' and 'truth'.

Chapter 3 – Proximity

In new extreme films, the close-up and extreme close-up are often used in scenes of sex and violence. *9 Songs*, *Anatomy of Hell*, *The Brown Bunny*, *Intimacy* and *Trouble Every Day* feature close-ups of skin, limbs, genitals and intertwined bodies during sex. *Antichrist*, *Baise-moi*, *Fat Girl*, *A Hole in My Heart*, *In My Skin*, *Irreversible*, *A Serbian Film*, *Taxidermia*, *Trouble Every Day* and *Twentynine Palms* contain close-ups of sexual and non-sexualised violence. Sometimes we are confronted with the shock of a close-up, sometimes we endure a lingering close-up, sometimes the close-up runs along flesh. In proximate, visible detail we encounter bodies being touched; genital penetration; skin being pierced or cut; heads being crushed; blood, penises and labia being sucked; clitorises and hair being removed; children being born. The events cannot simply be reduced to a narrative element, but rather contain an affective force that compels the viewer to consider the brush of a fingertip across skin, the flick of a tongue on a clitoris, the smear of semen, tearing of skin or ripping of anus. New extreme films also use aural close-

ups to bring us closer to the depicted acts, disorienting and enveloping cinematography to engulf us in an event and scant aesthetic changes within scenes to avoid distracting us from our close engagement with the event.

The importance of the close-up is noted in many scholarly analyses of individual films including *Romance* (Brinkema 2006: 150), *Twentynine Palms* (Coulthard 2010: 179–80), *Baise-moi* (Wheatley 2011: 95), *A Hole in my Heart* (Larsson 2011: 149) and *A New Life* (Chamarette 2013: 198). Certain scholars point out common effects of proximity in new extreme films such as the evocation of touch, of materiality and of visceral sensations in the spectator. Grønstad argues that in new extreme films we experience "material encroaching upon the private space of the spectator" (2011: 23) while Horeck and Kendall posit the idea of "compromising closeness" (2011: 5; Kendall 2011: 51). In both these quotations, the film reaches out, diminishing the distance between screen and spectator: we feel physically closer to the depicted events than our physical distance from the screen might suggest.

The ethical potential of proximity, close-ups and the materiality they can evoke is addressed by Beugnet who provides a key theoretical framework for examining new extreme films. Beugnet explores the close-up in films by Catherine Breillat and Claire Denis, arguing that the close-up is endowed with a "force of *interpellation*" that "insists, calls on and directs the attention of the viewer" (2006: 25). Thinking about proximity beyond the close-up, Archer argues that *Baise-moi* evokes a proximity which "oversteps the boundaries," (2009: 74)[27] also suggesting that the combination of "proximity with [the film's] hardcore tropes" leads to *Baise-moi*'s most provocative affects (ibid.: 75). This chapter addresses the specific importance of proximity in

[27] Archer does not specify which boundaries he is referring to here.

new extreme films and how proximity fits into the confrontational ethical framework outlined in chapter 1.

Drawing on Beugnet's ideas about sensation and Marks's theory of haptic visuality, I argue that close-ups that emphasise sensation encourage the spectator to engage non-conventionally with images, to appreciate the material qualities of diegetic bodies and objects. Nonetheless, this proximity does not suggest knowledge or power over the depicted person or act, but a new insight. Looking at ethical theories of proximity I suggest that these conceptions of proximity parallel the ethical framework based on extremity outlined in chapter 1. Proximity is related to extremity because it has theoretical links to extremity, we are brought close to extreme acts and proximity itself is pushed to extremes in new extreme films. I show that touch, penetration, perforation and extirpation are extreme forms of proximity and that depictions of them operate comparably in numerous films. Proximity is understood as operating on two levels in these films: the proximities between the characters and the proximity felt between spectator and screen. These are often experienced together, but this is an important distinction to make. This chapter suggests that proximity is integral to making the spectator reconsider images relating to various political topics: feminism, national politics, post-colonialism, pornography and capitalism. I examine the caress in *9 Songs*, perforation in *In My Skin* before focussing on female bodies in *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*. An analysis of penetration and perforation in *Trouble Every Day* follows before I conclude with examinations of Serbian national politics and pornography in *A Serbian Film* and Hungarian national politics in *Taxidermia*. As in chapter 2, I argue that many of these films nonetheless communicate retrogressive political viewpoints that need critiquing.

Proximity – extremity – ethics

The characteristics of proximity in new extreme films are closely linked to the structure of extremity described in chapter 1. In particular, the acts that we see depicted in close-ups can be understood as taking proximity to extremes: we see limbs caressed, vaginas and mouths penetrated, skin perforated, bodies extirpated. If closeness is about a small distance between two objects then contact is the extreme limit of closeness where the distance of separation is reduced to zero. Touch or contact are therefore extreme forms of closeness. Penetration pushes touch to an extreme where body parts no longer just touch the surface but go inside, the caress of bodily insides against bodily outsides, the touchable surfaces of a body expanded to include the inside of a cheek, the vaginal wall or the lining of the anus, the incursion of one person into another. Perforation is similar except rather than expanding the surface area of touchable skin, that skin is broken, the caressing body part or implement pushing beyond accepted boundaries and through the skin. Writing about *Trouble Every Day,* Jean-Luc Nancy argues that: "*it takes touch to its most extreme point*: where touching becomes searching, touching under the skin, tearing out what it covers up" (Nancy 2008: 3; emphasis added). Just as touch is an extreme form of proximity, penetration and perforation are extreme points of touch. Perforation is taken to extremes in films such as *Taxidermia* when Balatony Lajoska turns himself into a hollow preserved shell because it is not just a case of "searching, touching under the skin," (ibid.) but of removing everything inside, extirpating it. Where penetration involves the caress of outsides on insides, in extirpation insides are brought outside, an extreme form of perforation where the touch of the external on the internal becomes the appropriation and extirpation of the internal.

That these are extremes of one another is highlighted in new extreme films because each often appears together with its extreme form: caressing and penetrating are intertwined in *9 Songs*;

penetration becomes perforation and destruction in *Trouble Every Day* as sex becomes cannibalism; penetration becomes destruction in *A Serbian Film* as sex becomes murder; and nearness becomes touch becomes perforation presented as penetration in *In My Skin* as self-harm is eroticised. As such, proximity operates in a prepositional relation to extremity within new extreme films. Through close-ups, extreme close-ups, an evocation of materiality, positioning the camera between lovers, proximal sound design, enveloping narratives and disorienting aesthetics, these films bring us close to extreme situations (*proximity to extremity*). In its different extreme forms (touch, penetration, perforation, extirpation) proximity becomes an engagement with the insides and outsides of boundaries of the body, of the skin; and in penetration and perforation, we see an oscillation between the inside and outside in the process of thrusting or cutting (*proximity as extremity*). In pushing proximity to its extremes and in presenting those extremes together with their non-extreme corollary we are made to encounter the *extremity of proximity*.

Moreover, certain kinds of proximity can evoke the ethical engagement with subjects, people and images I identify in new extreme films. In *Closeness: An Ethics* (Jodalen and Vetlesen 1997), Arne Johan Vetlesen suggests that "today more than ever, the task is to extend the scope of responsibility *beyond* the context of dyadic proximity in which it arises" (1997: 18), explicitly linking the physical closeness of two people ('dyadic proximity') to ethical questions of responsibility. Vetlesen may be looking beyond physical proximity or questions of responsibility, guilt and sympathy, but several chapters in *Closeness* indirectly respond to the same cultural and media-related concerns as Sontag (2003), Butler (2006) and Ardenne (2006). These scholars are interested in images of suffering and how the experience of looking at them is different from being physically close to someone suffering. Elsewhere, drawing on Levinas,

Desmond Manderson argues that proximity is "fundamental to […] why we have a responsibility to others […] proximity is an experience, emotional and bodily, and not an idea" (2005: 698). How we are brought close to the subjects of a film is therefore of paramount importance and in new extreme films, we do experience proximity, rather than simply being aware of it as an abstract concept.

Levinas claims that "justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity" (1981: 159). For Levinas, physical proximal presence of neighbour, plaintiff and judge is the only way for justice to avoid the 'disinterestedness' and 'deforming abstraction' into which it can develop (ibid.). Rather, "justice requires contemporaneousness of representation. It is thus that the neighbour becomes visible" and "the judge is not outside the conflict, but the law is in the midst of proximity" (ibid.). As well as noting Levinas's implicit linkage between visibility and proximity, we can see that just judgement and non-abstracted human relations are dependent on the physical presence of the person judging. Levinas is therefore able to say that proximity's "absolute and proper meaning presupposes 'humanity'" (ibid.: 81). In new extreme films it is the feeling in the spectator of being close to the depicted acts that makes possible the ethical encounter with the images. Such a sense of proximity is felt as provocative and confrontational, encouraging us to rethink images, or in Levinas's terms, to do justice to them.

Echoing Silverman's and Kuppers's demand for an ethics that provides insight without claiming to 'know' a person or situation, as well as respecting Levinas's demand for justice via proximity, Per Nortvedt and Marita Nordhaug propose an 'ethics of proximity' which "challenges agent neutrality as the ultimate and autocratic perspective from which moral reasons are legitimised. Instead it implies that proximity to the sufferer gives rise to moral reasons" (2008:

158). Such an ethics both removes the viewer from a position of superiority, and destabilises the viewer's position, to invoke a reflection on morality, precisely through a form of proximity. Nortvedt and Nordhaug's professional 'agent' parallels the spectator of new extreme films in having their stable viewing position undermined, in finding, through proximity to a patient (or image), that how they view the world has been altered, that they must rethink the morals and prejudices they hold. Proximity therefore feeds into the re-educative ethics of spectatorship demanded by Silverman, Kuppers, de Lauretis and Kozol where images can change how we interpret other images. It is important in this thesis to show *how* proximity can evoke such an ethics, and change how we look at images.

The close-up

An important starting point for thinking through spectator-screen proximity is the close-up, the most evident means by which the spectator experiences a sense of physical proximity to the diegetic characters. The close-up itself has attracted critical attention for at least a century. In 1916, Hugo Münsterberg heralded it as the cinematographic technique which "*transcends the power of any theatre stage*" (2005: 4). In 1924, Béla Balázs would remark that: "the close-up has not only widened our vision of life, it has also deepened it. […] Good close-ups are lyrical; it is the heart not the eye, that has perceived them" (2004a: 314, 315). The close-up, for Balázs, is a means of getting closer to characters, the situation and the mood, of interacting with the intricacies of their emotions. Principally, it helps us understand the face better and Balázs claims that "this most subjective and individual of human manifestations [the face] is rendered objective in the close-up" (Balázs 2004b: 316). A less flattering interpretation of the facial close-up is offered by Ronald Bergan, who channels Laura Mulvey's critique of Hollywood fetishism: "in the 30s and 40s, the female face in gorgeous close-up became a staple of the

Hollywood studios when the Hayes Code prevented revealing shots of the body" (2008: n.p.). Mulvey had highlighted the sexualised nature of the close-up as party to the fetishising, fragmenting gaze of the spectator in films by Josef von Sternberg: "the beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look" (Mulvey 1975: 43). Scholars link close-ups and body parts in a variety of ways, arguing that close-ups are used to explore inner character depths, to fetishistically replace the eroticised body, or to achieve the fetishistic scopophilia necessary for phallocentric control of the castrated female body. Such a focus on one particular body part is echoed in lists of the 'best' close-ups in (generally Hollywood) film, which consist of shots framing the faces of film stars (Larize 2009; Luck 2014; Anon. 2014). Moreover on a theoretical level, Mary Ann Doane notes that "the face and the close-up are equated in the arguments of [Gilles] Deleuze, [Jacques] Aumont and even Balázs" (2003: 98).

However, in relation to new extreme films, I focus not only on facial close-ups but any close-up, especially extreme close-ups which move beyond the point at which obvious physiological limits are clear, where skin, hair, clothes or eyes engulf the frame. As Karen Lury points out, the extreme close-up can reduce "our understanding of the image […] to an awareness of texture, of light and shade, the abstract rather than the concrete" (2003: 104). Or as Marks describes haptic looking, certain forms of close-ups can enable us "not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture" (2002: 8). This interest in the extreme close-up stems partially from its recurring use in new extreme films, but also because it can evoke visceral, affective and haptic qualities, as well as disorientation and destabilisation, in order to communicate an (uncomfortable) sense of proximity. In this context, Beugnet's work on the close-up, the extreme close-up and sensation is particularly useful as it helps to think through the specific aspects of

the close-up exploited in new extreme films, aspects that are not accounted for in the writings of Münsterberg, Balázs or Mulvey.

Beugnet suggests that the close-up can open up epistemological and affective spaces, not available in long shot, in ways that can be evocative and political: "the close-up (forcibly) brings the eye where it would not normally look. [It] [d]estroy[s] the customary effects of unifying perspective, erasing the elements of localization provided by the wider context" (2006: 25). The close-up cuts out so much contextual information that we must think carefully in order to understand the unfamiliar material. Unable to grasp contextual signifiers of meaning, we are forced to focus on what is in front of us to find meaning and our conclusions might be quite different from those to which the context might have led us: "in contrast with the body caught in action in medium or long shot, filming in close-up makes it possible to evoke a body that is temporarily freed from its function as social, cultural and even gender signifier" (ibid.: 30). In eschewing the distanced perspective of the long shot, the possibility of freeing ourselves from cultural codes presents itself. We normally judge a person or object from its surface and its context without waiting to, or being able to, feel its materiality. Detaching elements from their contextual surroundings opens up a space for alternative interpretations because atypical information is being presented to us.

A long shot of a naked man gives us information about his fitness level, his proclivity for sunbathing, his grooming regime, his posture. An extreme close-up of a naked man's torso, in contrast, gives us different information: the man's breathing rate, his sensual excitement, the temperature of the room and his propensity to perspire. The close-up asks us to look differently at this torso than the long shot, and in the absence of contextualising shots, this proximate information focussed on physical aspects of his body becomes our only engagement with this

body. In a scene from *Trouble Every Day*, it takes some time before we can identify the body as male, while in many later shots of sex in *I Want Your Love* (Mathews, 2012) it is hard to identify which lover is being filmed at that moment. Rather than looking at these bodies from a personal or gender identity perspective, these close-up images evoke their subjects' material, physical presence: their touch, how they respond to another person, the texture of their skin, the vibrations of their body.

For Beugnet, this evocation of materiality is not just an effect of certain close-ups, rather, the close-up always has the potential to evoke aspects of an object or person that exceed the visual, notably touch. She argues that:

> at the same time, as it draws the gaze towards visual abstraction via physical and affective closeness, the close-up also contributes to a more multi-sensoral evocation of the film world. In representation as in perception, the close-up thus serves to explore that which connects the sensual with the conceptual, and ultimately brings out the rich potential of the cinematic vision, simultaneously closing in and opening onto new perspectives. (Beugnet 2007: 89)

For Beugnet, the close-up is about affect and a multi-sensorial appreciation of diegetic events. Moreover, it is precisely this proximate 'closing-in', possible with the close-up, that enables an 'opening onto new perspectives'. This echoes an ethics of proximity in which 'agent neutrality' is challenged and through proximity, illuminating perspectives on morality and our relations with others become visible (Nortvedt and Nordhaug 2008: 158). Beugnet's linking of the close-up and re-imagined perspectives also demonstrates that new perspectives on representation can be found using representation; in viewing the bodies of *Trouble Every Day* and *I Want Your Love* in close-up, we become aware of the difference between these depictions and

more distanced shots. Just as I argued that Kristeva's description of the milk skin showed how to link visibility, corporeal reactions and ethics (chapter 2), so can we see in Beugnet's description a clear link from the proximity of the close-up to affective corporeal reactions (the sensation of touch) to a transformative visual ethics ('new perspectives').

Beugnet argues that this transformation is possible because the close-up's power is not just linked to an evocation of materiality but extends to a general disruptive potential, because of the change in the spectator's relation to the screen: "at the point where the boundary between subject and object of the gaze appears to dissolve […] the cinematic experience offers itself most strikingly as an exultant combination of pleasure and terror" (2007: 89). In positing the dissolution of subject-object relations, the evocation of pleasure and terror, or the initiation of multi-sensorial encounters with the image, Beugnet suggests a disruptive potential in the close-up. For Beugnet, following Pascal Bonitzer, this 'exultant combination' is possible because of the "'poetic anarchy' called forth by the close-up's inherent power of rupture" which classical narrative cinema sought to contain (Beugnet 2007: 90; Bonitzer 1999: 28):

> in effect, the close-up shot initially generates a spatial, temporal and figurative as well as a perceptual disruption. It dis-locates the object of the gaze, fragments it and carves it out of its surroundings […] By the same token, the close-up thus also ruptures the body of the *récit* and brings the narrative flow to a halt, almost like a still picture. (Beugnet 2007: 90)

The close-up is part of the destabilising force of new extreme films, not only evoking materiality but also disrupting devices, such as narrative, that structure and stabilise. What Beugnet so effectively identifies and elucidates is the power of the close-up; bodily fragmentation need not always be laden with the negative connotations attributed to it by psychoanalytic feminist

theory. Bringing these ideas together we can see that the close-up can produce a disruptive materiality, a sense of touch which disrupts modes of viewing, causing us to 'feel' images and see their textural aspects, which are generally elided in medium and long shots. An example of a disrupted viewing model by a new extreme film through the evocation of materiality would be *Baise-moi*, when a discussion of rhetoric cuts to a close-up of a headless woman's legs as she massages her pubis and menstrual blood drips into the bath. Nicole Fayard describes this as "foregrounding the materiality of the female body – its drives, pulsations and emanations – piss, blood, and sweat all partake in the debunking both of the idealized female and of the femme fatale" (2006: 74). The material evocation of bodily secretions asks us to reconsider representations of menstruation.

In thinking about the close-up and the evocation of materiality in film, Marks's work on haptic images is another important reference point and is drawn on frequently by Beugnet. Moreover Marks's understanding of the relation of haptic images to narrative, of spectator-screen power relations and of the erotic, are relevant to how new extreme films function. In terms of 'feeling' images, Marks distinguishes 'haptic vision' from 'optical vision' with haptic images being those which "invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well" (2000: 2). Optical images remain on a purely visual level, they remain symbolic, received only as visual information.[28] For Marks, this can be understood by thinking about their relation to narrative: while 'optical' images present information about a narrative, "the haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative" (2000: 163). Rather than being pulled into the *narrative* of the images, the haptic close-up draws us into *an image* that overwhelms the narrative, or as Beugnet put it, "brings the narrative flow to a halt" (2007: 90). For Marks,

[28] As an example, Marks suggests that "obviously we need both kinds of visuality: it is hard to look at a lover's skin with optical vision; it is hard to drive a car with haptic vision" (2000: 163).

haptic images invite a different intersubjective relationship with the image than with optical images: the viewer is encouraged to "dissolve his or her subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image" (2002: 13), or as Beugnet puts it, boundaries between subject and object dissolve (2007: 89). This challenges both the viewer and conventions based on the distanced viewing of images because it involves "giving up visual control" and one's "own sense of separateness from the image" (Marks 2002: 13).

This changed relationship to the image asks us to think about the nature of the image and what knowledge we can gain from an image. Marks contends that "haptic visuality inspires an acute awareness that *the thing seen evades vision* and must be approached through the other senses" (2000: 191; emphasis added). Much like a lover's kiss, the eye gets closer and closer to an object as if to discover more about it only to realise that, at a certain point, optical vision is limited. Haptic imagery is not about 'knowing' the object or possessing it, but rather brushing up against it, both physically in contact and metaphorically in the sense of interaction without mastery, without the distanced power of the optical gaze. Moreover, Marks describes haptic vision in terms of a visual erotics which "allows the thing seen to maintain its unknowability, delighting in playing at the boundary of that knowability. Visual erotics allows the object of vision to remain inscrutable" (2002: 18–19). Once again, cinematographic techniques commonly used in new extreme films such as the caressing, brushing g(r)aze, so common in *9 Songs*, are described as an insight that nonetheless does not congeal into the 'tyranny of essence' (Silverman 1996: 2) nor into a claim of 'full knowability' (Kuppers 2007: 2). For Marks, the viewing subject's radical alterity is not questioned; rather we interact with the subject, with the boundaries of their and our selves, 'excorporatively' without the suggestion of incorporating them or their perspective into our own. Importantly this emphasises our position as spectator because empathy with the characters is restricted: we may gain a sense of Alex's suffering

during the rape in *Irreversible*, but we remain a spectator; we may feel visceral pain as Esther cuts herself in *In My Skin*, but we are always only watching, a companion or witness rather than inculcated into her psychological perspective. Once again, cinematic techniques associated with proximity, which appear frequently in new extreme films, are linked to the ethics I identify as structuring our encounter with new extreme films.

Another important link between haptics and new extreme films is the eroticism which Marks sees as inherent to haptic images. Marks argues that "eroticism arrives in the way a viewer engages with this surface and in a dialectical movement between the surface and the depth of the image. In short, haptic visuality is itself erotic; the fact that some of these are sexual images is, in effect, icing on the cake" (2002: 13–14). Distancing herself from a Levinasian view whereby eroticism is constituted in the radical alterity of the Other (Marks 2000: 256n20), Marks suggests that the eroticism of the haptic image resides in its uncertain status, in its unresolved tensions of competing and interconnecting viewer-viewed relations, and in the movement between proximity and distance. This echoes my description of extremity in new extreme films as concerning unresolved tensions, but also suggests another reason for considering certain films as extreme. Where I suggested that the confluence of sex and violence or the eroticisation of acts already at the outer edge of acceptability linked many new extreme films, haptic images of sex demonstrate a double eroticism where erotic scenarios are filmed using techniques already connoted as erotic. Indeed Marks's description of 'haptic pornography' is similar to what I suggest new extreme films enact:

> The haptic image indicates figures and then backs away from representing them fully – or often, moves so close to them that for that reason they are no longer visible. Rather

> than making the object fully available to view, haptic cinema puts the object into question, calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction. (Marks 2002: 15–16)

Putting images of sex in question and asking viewers to consider how they are constructed is precisely what we see in *9 Songs, Romance, Anatomy of Hell* and *I Want Your Love*, the first three of which feature significantly in this chapter.

This movement between proximity and distance as well as a double eroticism point to the difficulties of finding a stable critical distance when watching proximate images in new extreme films. Walter Benjamin notes that "criticism is a matter of correct distancing," (1986: 85) and when this 'correct' distancing is put in doubt by changing proximity and distancing, it becomes difficult to situate oneself in relation to the film, to respond from a position of critical solidity. Beugnet argues that the close-up has the capacity to provoke a perceptual disruption (2007: 90) and in moving from proximity to distance we also encounter further disruptions of critical stability. Where Benjamin's 'correct distancing' encourages us to judge images based on the preconceptions we have about images, new extreme films' destabilising of secure viewing positions puts these preconceptions in question, revealing aspects of images to which we do not commonly gain access. Let us look at how this works in the sex-filled *9 Songs*.

The caress – *9 Songs*

9 Songs has a simple premise, with scenes of a couple, Lisa and Matt, having sex in various sometimes innovative ways, intercut with visits to nine music concerts (whence the title). These chronologically narrated events are bookended by Matt's visit to the Antarctic in his capacity

as a climate-change scientist, thus framing all the sex and music as a series of flashback reminiscences undertaken after the relationship has foundered. In an early scene, the couple interrupt breakfast to have sex. The lighting is a yellow-golden colour from the rising sun and the room is otherwise shadowy. In medium close-up, they kiss standing and rub their lips across each other's bodies. After a dark close-up of their faces, kissing, Lisa reaches into Matt's pyjama trousers, the camera tilts down to see her rubbing his erect penis. Sun streams in from the window behind and their faces are almost in darkness. Matt pushes Lisa over to a table where, in a closer shot, they take off their shirts and Matt kneels to perform cunnilingus on Lisa. They are suddenly naked. Next to another window, their skin glows, the sun reflecting brightly off Lisa's breasts and face, emphasising their surface texture and suggesting warmth. The camera much closer, we then see shots of Lisa's face, sometimes obscured by her knee. Cut to a side-shot of Matt's head in her groin, the camera speckled with light. The camera tilts up to Lisa's face and from a shot slightly closer to her body, tilts down towards her vagina behind Matt's head, as though we are peering in between Lisa's legs next to him. The shot is dark and we can just make out two brief licks before Matt stands up to kiss Lisa. The frame becomes awash with thrusting, their heads bob out of the frame and shoulders bob into it. The camera beings us too close to see the totality of this but emphasises the movement, their touching bodies thrown in different directions. As Matt climaxes, the camera remains on their faces as they touch foreheads. They kiss each other teasingly before Lisa goes over to the kitchen. The camera pans back to Matt, touching his penis, emphasising the friction it has just experienced. Throughout this scene the frame does not contain the characters' bodies, rather the image is focussed on the back of a head, a tongue against a clitoris, foreheads touching. The images move back and forth between close-ups and medium close-ups meaning that we remain close to the couple, but also experience the erotic movement between surface and depth described

by Marks. Importantly we never take up the visual perspective of either of the characters,[29] but rather occupy the position of a proximate companion, looking over Matt's shoulder or standing close as they embrace.

There are generally no narrative developments or character emotions signalled by particularities in the sex and so the narrative of *9 Songs* does not distract from the evocation of materiality. Rather, the sex scenes frequently operate in a temporal void with no before/after context, drawing the viewer's attention into the acts and not their importance as a narrative element. Several sex scenes are presented one after the other, and we wallow in them, feel them, experience the touch and slap of their caresses, the ooze of their secretions. It is therefore difficult to distance oneself from the images of sex, and yet *9 Songs* avoids the boredom of many pornographic scenes by keeping the sex scenes short and by alternating them with music sequences. We see an erotic movement from the proximity of the sex scenes to the distance of the music scenes (filmed in long shot from the back of the venues) and back to the sex scenes' proximity. Pornography tends to focus on the fact that sex acts are taking place – the fact of fellatio, the fact of penetration – demonstrated in the variety of angles used to show a single act (to prove its authenticity) and in the variety of acts depicted. In contrast, a fellatio in *9 Songs* is not just a head bobbing on a penis (although there is a shot of this); it is also the tender caress of tongue across glans, breath on foreskin, the sticky warmth of semen on stomach, the gentle post-coital embrace. In close-up we watch Lisa's tongue run along and around Matt's penis, testicles and adjoining skin as the camera pans up and down Matt's body, evoking not the unitary idea of fellatio but the specific contact of her tongue on his body, the individual elements that make up the act of fellatio. As Matt ejaculates, touch is emphasised over orgasmic release: we see Lisa squeezing the semen out of his penis, the semen's dribble onto Matt's stomach and Matt's

[29] 'POV' shots being particularly common in pornography (Frey 2016: 169).

hand reaching up to touch it. In *9 Songs* we are brought close to the actors' bodies, asked to feel their interactions rather than just observe, to engage with their touch and not just with the abstract idea of sex, arousal or emotional connection. The close-up, the proximate evocation of materiality and the narrative structure does not distract from these, focussing on the specific tactile elements of an act rather than only seeing it as an undifferentiated single act.

Mostly, *9 Songs*'s provocation seems to come from its boundary-breaking status both in relation to mainstream film and pornography with many reviewers castigating it for failing both as a conventional love story and as titillation (Christopher 2005; Dawson 2005; Snider 2005). It is extreme both from a mainstream perspective for containing visible sex and from a pornographic perspective for insufficiently focussing on the sex, which although substantial, only takes up about half of the film and is often about images of romantic play as much as sex itself. Certain elements are on the inside of the limits of convention and pornography (*extremus*) and some just beyond (*exter*). The most common negative reaction by critics was to describe *9 Songs* as 'boring', described by Bradshaw as "the unshockable-sophisticate alternative to condemnation on moral grounds" (2005). The proximities of *9 Songs* can change how we interpret images of sex, by making visible the ridiculous, performed nature of much pornography such that in 2005, the first British film to feature ejaculation and not be legally categorised as pornography is decried as boring rather than morally reprehensible. It is in this sense that *9 Songs* came to be described in terms of authenticity by many reviewers who saw its visible proximate sex as commenting on the fictions of conventional pornography: the film was described as 'naturalistic' (Higgins 2004), 'real' (Ebert 2005), 'real life' (Bradshaw 2005) and 'authentic' (Tobias 2005).

Nonetheless, we must be aware of retrogressive elements in *9 Songs*. Melanie Williams foreshadows my comments about new extreme films in general when she sums up *9 Songs* as "bracingly radical in some aspects, [while] in others it feels surprisingly retrograde" (2006: 62). The key element that Williams critiques is the gendered differences in the depictions of Matt and Lisa: differences in how their bodies are made visible to us, how their sexuality is depicted and the narrative significance given to female masturbation. Firstly, in many scenes and like in conventional pornography, the camera lingers at length over Lisa's face and torso, much less so on Matt's; close-ups of Lisa often emphasise her "open, desiring mouth," at times "abstracting and depersonalizing her remaining visible facial features. Matt is never shot in this way" (ibid.). Secondly, when Matt claims he does not "think about her clothes, or her work, where she was from, or even what she said, […] [he] doesn't leave much of Lisa *except* her sexuality" (ibid.: 61). Thirdly, despite most of the sex acts throughout the film being detached from specific narrative meaning, Lisa's solo masturbation is a turning point in the relationship, a rejection of the penis rather than an enjoyment of another kind of sex: "unlike other sex acts in the film, female masturbation has to be burdened with narrative significance – it is made to 'mean' the end of the road for the couple" (ibid.: 62). Finally these critiques of sexuality and female masturbation come together in the use of an image of Lisa masturbating on the DVD cover when images of the couple together predominate in the film: "Lisa's sexuality is not for herself but for others, and her masturbation only has positive meaning as an alluring spectacle" (ibid.).

To these I can add that narrative meaning is attached to the scenes of female sexual dominance: while female submissiveness, in two blindfold sequences, is characterised as a natural part of the relationship, the scene of female domination comes immediately after the masturbation

sequence. It is therefore coded as an apology for Lisa's rejection of the penis and as a reassertion of male power, Lisa performing to regain the favour of her master.[30] In terms of sexuality, *9 Songs* places strict limits on the possibilities of female sexuality. When Lisa ignores Matt in favour of a girl in a strip club, Matt leaves in disgust, as Lisa's active desire points to Matt and his penis not being integral to Lisa's sexual pleasure, a viewpoint emphasised by the intercutting with images of Lisa masturbating alone. The narrative is entirely framed from a male perspective while the voiceover, which describes Lisa as uncontrollable, shallow and thoughtless, presents the film as yet another example of active men looking at women-objects. While Matt is a glaciologist, Lisa is a year-abroad student, talking only about inanities, unable to take anything seriously and interesting only inasmuch as she has a high sex drive. Finally, *9 Songs*'s links to phallocentric pornography are emphasised in one early scene when Lisa moans excitedly, "fuck me, fuck me please […] do it faster, fuck me faster, cum inside me, cum inside me"; here the language of pornography is undeniable.

Thus while *9 Songs* brings us close to its images, evoking the materiality of the individual elements of sexual acts and while it challenges pornographic depictions of sex by creating ways of depicting visible sex in the mainstream, the film is still grounded in the chauvinist phallocentrism of conventional heterosexual pornography. *9 Songs* shows the intensity of its affinity with a male gaze and with pornographic viewing paradigms which enable some to reject it as part of a rising "pornographic sea" (Holden 2005) because *9 Songs* has not detached itself from pornography's ideology even as it does from so much of pornography's aesthetics. It is taboo-smashing (ibid.) but what is most provocative, is how few conventions it breaks with. It is an excellent example to begin with because it demonstrates both forms of proximity: the close-

[30] Despite Deleuze's description of the masochist as the one in control in a submissive act (1989: 21–22), the framing of this scene as an apology highlights male dominance in excess of that which Deleuze suggests is inherent to the masochist.

ness, touch and penetration of the characters and the close-ups, haptic imagery and non-distracting narrative that bring the spectator close into these proximate acts. The following section examines how sex and violence become intertwined in a destructive eroticism, where the character is interested in perforation rather than penetration and where our proximity is to grizzly acts of self-mutilation rather than tender acts of conventional sexual pleasure.

Perforation – *In My Skin*

In My Skin follows Esther, who works for a marketing company and gains a promotion to work with external clients. At a party, Esther accidentally cuts her leg badly and from then on begins to cut herself regularly, slowly receding from her social arenas: boyfriend, friends and eventually society at large. The film is full of long close-ups: grazing along her bare legs while she works, documenting the stages of cutting away a bloodied bandage, visual and aural close-ups of fingernails picking at varnished wood and of drips of blood on her face. In a scene in a restaurant, when entertaining two clients, Esther drinks heavily as her boss and clients drone on about intercultural differences, advertising ploys and the Japanese markets. We begin to ignore the conversation, and as the camera returns repeatedly to close-ups of Esther's face intercut with reverse shots of the other people round the table, we are drawn into Esther's concerns. Suddenly Esther's left hand grabs the food on her plate and is nearly stabbed by the fork in her right hand before her right hand drags her left hand away from the plate. This happens again as though her hand seeks affinity with the dead flesh up for consumption or is attracted to the materiality of the meat which it can grasp, cut, tear, eat. As the camera pans in close-up along her left arm, we see that her left forearm has become severed from her body and lies inert on the table but no-one notices; we are perhaps exposed to Esther's subjective experience. She pulls the arm off the table only to find it reattached as normal without a mark. She seems

alarmed, and in several close-ups, she stabs at her arm, first with a knife, then her nails and finally a key until blood is drawn, the skin moving and resisting in disconcertingly authentic fashion. These close-ups are intercut with close-ups of her face which evinces release and satisfaction, calmed by the blood-letting. This seems to reassure her that she is connected to her own body and not separated from it as she was moments before. We then see close-ups of the other guests cutting steaks and chicken as well as peeling grapes, and the noise of this and the ambient noise of cutlery scraping against plates increases, Esther's head flicking to and fro as though alert to these auditory minutiae. Sound envelops us in the experience: we are attuned to the different perforations and incisions of flesh that are taking place around the room. There is then a shot of her ripping at flesh-coloured tights (although she is wearing black trousers) before the conversation focuses awkwardly in on her, the other guests' observing her as she grabs her jacket and escapes.

The epistemological status of this scene is unclear: Esther's arm clearly does not detach, the shot of ripping tights cannot be taken at face value as she is wearing trousers, no-one seems to notice her stabbing her arm or leaving with cut, bloodied skin. Yet the way her skin puckers and twists when she attacks it looks life-like and is shown from such a close-up viewpoint; we are in the territory of modal ambiguities again, the distinction between Esther's and de Van's skin becoming unclear. The close-up emphasises the tiny details giving the scene authenticity: documentary space has leaked into fictional space. As the violence intensifies and her cutting intensifies, the sense of modal ambiguities fades because an actor would not harm herself in this way but close-ups of her eroticised wounds continue to place us close to Esther while she inflicts her wounds, enveloping us in her passionate engagement with her own body.

In a later scene in a hotel we hear the moans of pleasure/pain as a blood-bespattered Esther bites her arm and uses a knife to cut into her legs while supine on the floor. She bites her arm, wrapping it around herself like an embrace before pulling her legs up over her head. A close-up from above shows her face, sometimes obscured by her legs as the camera tries to get too close. She stares greedily at the wounds in her thighs; a cut to the side sees her licking gently at her cuts before we return to the previous shot, as blood drips, money-shot-like, onto her face. She rubs the blood over her eyes and sucks her fingers to taste it, alluding to sex and pornography. Her legs obscure her face like the back of a lover's head might when leaning for a kiss, the blood on her face stands in for money-shot semen, her bent posture evokes auto-fellatio and afterwards she lies immobile on the floor in a post-orgasmic haze. We are brought into the erotic world of Esther's self-mutilation, all shown in close-up as though we accompany her, bring us (too) close to her unusual sexual endeavours: the perforations of her skin, the drips of blood on her face, the lumps of flesh and skin she cuts out of herself. We are encouraged to look at the body materially, to think of it as a physical entity and not just as a representational tool in a capitalist production machine or a visual object in a phallocentric viewing regime. Esther's engagement with her material body and our visceral engagement with the film is how we are asked to see alternative meanings in the same body: Esther's body remains the same throughout but we come to view it differently as the film unfolds.

As these descriptions demonstrate, we do not simply see unitary self-harm events undifferentiatedly grouped together. Rather, we see their individual elements and are encouraged to feel their texture: the flick of tongue on wound, the drip of blood on her face, the friction of key on forearm. Watching, I tensed up and pulling my arms and legs back into myself as though trying to escape contact with the cutting implements. As Palmer notes, *In My Skin* "probes [the body's] nature as material substance" (2011: 82) and indeed de Van herself declares that "my

subject was in the material of the body" (in ibid.: 83). The visibility of her cuttings and our proximity to them are therefore central to the provocative, confrontational evocation of the sensations of her woundings in the spectator. This proximity is further emphasised by the aural close-ups in these scenes: her erotic moans in the hotel are captured close to the body. Moreover in the restaurant scene, when we see close-ups of the food of different diners being cut up, we are given extreme aural close-ups of skin being peeled off grapes, and of cutlery scraping against plates, which accentuates the miniscule elements of the act

In My Skin combines a critique of patriarchy and of late capitalism by focussing on these affective evocations of her violent actions. Esther's predicament is not predominantly psychological in nature – demonstrating her inability to cope with the demands of modern life – rather it is a productive choice on her part, an exploration of aspects of the world that had previously eluded her. She does not cut herself because she sees no other way to cope with the world but because it allows her to counter the alienation from her material body which late-capitalist patriarchy encourages. As Jacques Mandelbaum suggests, there is, in *In My Skin*, "an opposition of the individual body and of the social body, a backlash against the fragmentary corporatisation of humanity" (in Palmer 2011: 84–85). Alienation – from society, from her body, from her friends – is a central theme and it is in how Esther reconnects with the fleshiness of her body, that *In My Skin* asks us to reconsider the meaning we attach to the female body, to self-harm, to agency and to society.

Esther is fully integrated into the profiteering corporate world of marketing. In her (re)discovery of the materiality of her own body, however, she is able to engage with her own existence, transcending the glitzy superficies of corporate networking, her friend's petty jealousies, the chauvinistic tauntings of her male friends and the controlling desires of boyfriend and doctor

alike. As Carrie Tarr remarks, this rediscovery of her body can be read as an escape from the patriarchal constraints of the world. It is an attempt to fashion her own regulatory system outside of the control of others: "this self-mutilation, however self-destructive, serves to give her back some sort of control over her life," and in its affective address to the spectator, the film shows "a woman's visceral reaction against what Judith Butler describes as 'normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate various bodily beings'" (Tarr 2010: 70; Butler 1993: x). Esther's encounter with her body as material substance is a means of countering the disassociation of the person herself from the world in contemporary society. In a Marxist reading this is akin to countering the disjunction between labour and value in the commodity fetish, where the product is the human body. In a feminist reading this is a reinstatement of the actual woman in a patriarchal world which reduces women to visual objects for male viewing pleasure.

Nicolas Azalbert, citing Foucault, interprets this evocation of a material perspective on the body as an exposure of power relations in modern society, arguing that *In My Skin* makes visible "'the abstract stage of a *bio-power* that does not aim to punish the bodies, but to turn them into docile entities through processes of subjection (social, sexual or aesthetic) that individuals integrate unwillingly" (in Beugnet 2007: 160). Esther rejects such conformist docility, demonstrating her control over her body and her corporeal independence: far from reflecting the desires of the men in her life, her body becomes a productive site of blood as well as her locus of control over her own sexuality and her own desires. The proximate engagement with Esther's acts, which confront the spectator with this re-acquaintance and thereby with the alienating logic of the system, is what forms the politically engaged ethical encounter between film and spectator.[31]

[31] As Brinkema (2009) notes, this is a rejection not only of the control of patriarchy but of the ideology of the heteronormative couple.

Esther's engagement with the extremes of closeness – touch and perforation – and the spectator's proximate engagement with these acts, their materiality and affective power can lead us to rethink the nature of the female body. The spectator is encouraged to reinterpret the female body as material substance against capitalist and patriarchal attempts at alienation, and to see woman as a productive and self-sufficient entity, independent of the need for male control whether through the controls of medicine, corporate structures or a spouse. Proximity is integral to the spectator being made to reinterpret Esther's body and visibility is also relevant in modal ambiguities and a sense of disgust. The next section continues to think about the female body as well as focussing in greater detail on the idea of woman as productive.

Productive bodies – *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*

Romance and *Anatomy of Hell* are both heavily engaged in philosophical interpretations of women and the female body. *Romance* follows Marie, in a sexless relationship with Paul, on a journey of sexual exploration, principally through encounters with Paolo, a stranger from a bar and Robert, headmaster at the school where she teaches, who introduces her to BDSM practices. After spontaneous oral sex in a corridor, a man rapes her and after persuading Paul finally to have sex with her (although he angrily rejects her mid-coitus), Marie falls pregnant and we follow her medical examinations until when she blows up Paul in their flat to be alone with her new-born son. *Anatomy of Hell* follows a woman who employs a gay male stranger to "watch her where she is unwatchable" (whence Grønstad's book title) for four consecutive nights. At first they talk, with the man (they have no names) sitting drinking whisky, the woman lying naked in bed. Things grow more intense including episodes when he drinks her menstrual blood, examines her vagina and its secretions, inserts a garden tool into her vagina while she sleeps, and finally a sex scene. The film ends with the man pushing the woman off a cliff

although it is unclear whether this is diegetic or a fantasy sequence. Both films feature visible shots of aroused genitalia and penetration, while menstrual blood and childbirth also feature visibly. They also feature many close-ups, caressing shots and enveloping aesthetic techniques creating a feeling of proximity between the spectator and the depicted acts. This is in addition to the images of proximity and its extremes: touch and penetration. Like *9 Songs*, we see numerous caressing shots, which rather than embodying any of the characters, encourage us to look *with* the characters.

The caress of the camera occurs several times in *Romance*: when Marie has sex with Paolo (as he penetrates Marie, the camera slowly zooms in onto their heads and then during sex, pans slowly across to their lower halves and back towards their heads, a camera movement repeated when Paolo climaxes); or when Marie and Robert kiss for the first time (the camera focuses on his eyes flicking down to her lips, the camera runs up and down Marie's arm, the close-up on Marie with Robert's face slowly moving into the frame). When Marie is tied up by Robert for the first time, we are given visual and aural close-ups of the detailed manoeuvres: the rubbing of the rope is audible, each knot is shown in close-up and the spectator starts to pay attention to the minutiae of this tying, to each small element making up the large unitary whole of a 'BDSM scene'. Thus when a close-up shot of Marie's pubic hair draws us towards her genitals, the image and sound of the rope being pulled tight across them helps us to feel the touch keenly, our imagination filling the gaps as though the rope rubs along our genitals, drawing the viewer into the sensual intricacies of sexual submission. In a later scene, we are given a close-up shot of a baby and associated viscera emerging from Marie's vagina, the stretching of such a small hole visible to the spectator, the pain of labour emphasised by the cut to a shock explosion from Marie's house. These close-up shots (and close-up audio) emphasise the materiality of skin,

rope and amniotic fluid, bringing us close to what is happening both in the camera's proximity to the acts and in our affective engagement with these acts.

In *Anatomy of Hell* there is a similar approach to sex which confrontationally foregrounds bodily sensation. We are placed in an unidentifiable space where the act of looking is immediately thematised: an unnamed woman's instruction to a man is solely that he watch her. The camera watches as well, regularly surveying the woman's naked body in close-up, from a distance, fuzzily and sharply focussing our attention on her as she touches herself, as he goes to touch her, on the implements that are placed in her or ooze out of her; the texture, the viscosity of these implements and secretions, the man's encounter with them. At one point the man leans down to look at the woman's vagina: a close-up of her genitals suddenly fills the frame as a stone dildo is expelled. The dark bushy pubic hair and the visceral, oozing close-up of the vagina stand in stark contrast to the pristine, hairless genitals of the conventional, maximally visible, porn performer. The film cuts to the man's puzzled face; this is not a vagina to be dominated but one whose hidden depths have been estranged from societal view. We are forced into close proximity with those depths and can feel the slippery release of the dildo. In two other scenes, the texture, taste and materiality of menstrual blood are emphasised. In one, the woman takes her used tampon, dips it in a glass of water, inviting the man to drink. The man clearly wishes to avoid this watery mix of menstrual blood and vaginal secretions, which evokes his disgust and revulsion, but he eventually drinks it, admitting there was little to be concerned about. In a later scene, the man finally penetrates the woman vaginally, engaging in wild thrusting which pushes them over the edge of the bed, as he climaxes. The camera cuts to a side-shot close-up of his bloodied penis leaving her vagina as blood spurts out into a pool on the bedsheets. We see a longer shot of him massaging his bloodied penis, sitting on the blood-spattered bedsheets while the woman stands, facing away from the camera, a thick line of blood

dripping down the back of her thigh. The materiality of blood is emphasised here in the spurting motion, the trickle down her leg and the way he touches himself and the blood, feeling its viscosity and texture both against his penis and against his hand.

Entwined in such acts and images, the spectator's body in *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell* is demonstrated to be sexual, arousable and disgustable. We are exposed to the vicissitudes of our own bodies; these films upset "the gratifying exteriority" of most films (Grønstad 2007: 167). We can no longer separate ourselves from the text but are inextricably caught up in it, which removes our control and challenges the supposedly objective and disinterested spectator. As Beugnet remarks (noted earlier), sensation is able to dissolve the boundary between the subject and the object of a gaze (2007: 89) while Marks notes that "since memory functions multisensorily, a work of cinema, though it only directly engages two senses, activates a memory that necessarily involves all the senses" (2000: 22). It is our memories and fantasies that have been integrated into the film's images; and our body which is reacting to the film as a result. As Brinkema says of *Romance*: "if we are left sticky at the end […] it is because the touch of the film and our touch back have ceased to allow a meaningful distinction between out there and in here, in a bodily and cinematic sense. […] I am wet, I am exposed in either case" (2006: 169). Or, as Williams suggests in relation to body genres, "we feel too directly, too viscerally manipulated by the text" (1991: 5). In each of these interpretations, we and our bodies are brought up close to the film, made to feel 'sticky' or 'manipulated' and to engage with the materiality of all aspects of sex. A scene in *Anatomy of Hell* sees the man reaching inside the woman's vagina and bringing out a clear jelly-like substance on his fingers – natural vaginal lubricants, which we also see in *Romance* – which he touches at uncertainly and rubs into his hair. This stickiness is shown in close-up, as is the subsequent shot of his whole finger entering her vagina, emphasising the material nature of this sexual encounter.

Sex, here, is not a metaphor, it is a material thing; we see what Brinkema calls the "materialization of sex" (2006: 152). The films demand that we engage with the mechanisms of sex itself, that we see through societal views of woman and sex which seek to erase the material elements of sex and womanhood; especially menstruation and childbirth. We are exposed to our loss of control, to the manipulation of our bodies by the image and to the disconcerting fluidity between the space inside and outside the diegesis. On the one hand, this operates in a comparable way to *9 Songs* by engaging the spectator materially, with images of visible sex, expanding the restricted parameters of pornographic representation, exploring different ways in which visible sex can 'mean' and encouraging us to interpret visible sex away from its common pornographic connotations. On the other hand, *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell* consider aspects of sex which are generally elided from representation and discussion (menstruation, childbirth, contraception) as well as thinking through conceptions of the female body more generally.

Having established that *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell* engage the spectator with the materiality of their depicted acts, I contend that proximity and this affective evocation of materiality are a means to reconsider representations and conceptualisations of women. Firstly, *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell* ask us to engage closely with images of childbirth and menstruation which are generally elided from mainstream depictions of women: these acts are made proximately visible, asking us to deal with them rather than avoiding them. Secondly, both films ask us to reconsider interpretations of the vagina and female genitalia which see them as the scary locus of Freudian 'castration anxiety' and a pornographic object of domination and control. Thirdly, *Romance* encourages us to rethink the interpretations we attach to certain positions that women can find themselves in; here I focus on the supine woman. Finally, both films encourage us to see women not as lack or absence as so many thinkers since Freud have done but as productive and present.

Firstly, menstruation and childbirth are shown to be aspects of women and sex we should not elide or demonise. In *Anatomy of Hell*, close-ups on the glass of menstrual blood and water might evoke a sense of disgust, but the revolted affective reaction of protagonist and spectator is undercut when the man admits it was perfectly fine. The undercutting of the reaction elicited by proximate images of menstrual blood encourages us to consider why we are disgusted and whether it is an appropriate reaction. Similarly, the shock of seeing blood spurt out of the woman's vagina after sex is undercut by the woman mocking the man for his concern about the blood just because we generally link blood to violence. Again the shock and confrontational materiality of blood spurting, covering his penis and her legs, is undercut by her emphasis on the normalcy: there is no spectacle of violence, menstrual blood is just a normal part of being a woman. Together with the birth scene from *Romance*, we are confronted with two natural but hidden corollaries to sex. The films bring us into close visceral relation with all parts of sex, with the female body and with our own preconceptions. Penetration in these two films is not separate from the blood of menstruation or the rupture of childbirth but part of a wider understanding of sex.

Secondly, we see sudden close-ups of female genitalia in both *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*, which focus on the genitals' material nature. Both the man in *Anatomy of Hell* and Robert in *Romance* are seen extracting vaginal secretions from their partners' vaginas and holding them up to the camera. In *Anatomy of Hell* the texture is further emphasised when the man runs it through his hair like gel. On the one hand this shows the female genitalia to be a source of fascination and mystery (especially for the gay man in *Anatomy of Hell*) rather than something to dominate and control; indeed the sudden close-up, with the genitals filling the screen creates quite an imposing image. On the other hand, these sudden close-ups are described by Best and Crowley as creating an "effect of extreme defamiliarisation" (2007: 71) in the context of a

familiar image from heterosexual pornography, which "enforces a self-conscious interrogation of what exactly it is the female body is cloistered for supposedly containing" (ibid.). As in the images of menstruation and childbirth, the female genitalia are rendered banal rather than endowed with metaphysical significance. In contrast with pornography, which Williams suggests is obsessed with 'revealing' the invisible sexuality of women (1999: 30ff), *Anatomy of Hell* reveals the banality of the vagina, amalgam of skin and flesh rather than a gateway to the mysteries of the universe.[32]

Thirdly, *Romance* uses our proximate affective engagement with images of sex, childbirth and medical examinations to encourage us to interpret female bodily positions differently, especially the woman supine with her legs open. This position is common to conventional heterosexual pornography, when the woman is penetrated repeatedly by a man. However, while this position features in *9 Songs*, *Intimacy*, *Anatomy of Hell* and *Romance*, Marie mainly finds herself in this position during her antenatal examinations and birth. Focussing on the visibility of the female genitalia when a woman is in this position, Downing argues that in *Romance* this focus on Marie's "dilated vagina" only occurs "as her baby's head crowns. In this non-sexual example of genital exposure, Breillat recuperates an image that belongs to female experience, but that has been co-opted for the masculine pornographic gaze" (2004: 271–72). This is a reinterpretation of an image, encouraged by an image, in that the woman's position is no different from the position she would take in a porn film but the position is linked to childbirth and medical examination rather than male sexual appropriation. The image remains the same but in proximately involving us in the gush of amniotic fluid, the forceful crowning of the baby's head or the latex-covered examination by medical students, affective sensations other than arousal are linked to this position. We are encouraged to see that the image of a woman

[32] For a discussion of these close-ups, their art historical heritage and links to Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* [*The Origin of the World*], see Wilson (2015).

positioned thus has no pornographic connotations innately attributable to it, just as the majority of images of visible sex are not intrinsically linked to pornography. Conventionally, however, many images of visible sex have been connected to pornography as have particular body positions, and *Romance* seeks to sever that attachment, providing other, less phallocentric meanings to such images.

That the woman supine with legs open wide is so linked to the appropriative male gaze regardless of context, is made clear in the fantasy orgy sequence in *Romance* where the bottom halves of anonymous labouring spread-legged women are penetrated by masturbating men in amongst gaudy red décor, whilst their top halves reside on the other side of a wall surrounded by clinical white walls and doting male partners. For *Romance*, even in the throes of labour, phallocentric society interprets a woman's genitalia as a sexual object for male sexual pleasure: "the female body [is] reduced to a series of holes to be filled, idealized object of desire" (Beugnet 2006: 34). John Phillips draws a similar conclusion from a comparison between the fantasy sequence and Marie's examination by medical students, in the latter of which "the erotic pleasure that men derive from vaginal penetration is […] concealed, passing itself off as medical treatment" (2001: 138). In a few minutes of film, we move from a medical examination, to the fantasy sequence, to another medical examination, to the birth. For most of her time on screen during these scenes, Marie is on her back with her legs open, demonstrating both the myriad ways in which this position can be interpreted and the fact that for society there remains an erotic fascination with this position. This is emphasised in two close-ups at the end of the fantasy sequence in which a man ejaculating on a woman's stomach cuts to a close-up of ultrasound gel being squeezed onto Marie's stomach. The affect of semen and gel on skin are therefore conflated: our material proximity to pornographic conventions (the money-shot ejaculation outside the body) conflated with proximity to medicine and pregnancy. In each of these cases, the

image itself is not changed: the supine woman still has her legs open wide; the vagina still exists; women are still having penetrative sex with men in the missionary position. Rather, we are asked to see these positions as not simply tools in the arsenal of heterosexual male viewing pleasure but as multifaceted, pluri-semantic constructions which have been reduced to one phallocentric convention but are really open to many others.

Finally, we can see *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell* as not only about reassessing *images* of women but also about reassessing common interpretations of woman based on lack. Irigaray notes that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis restrict woman to "'lack,' 'atrophy' (of the sexual organ), and 'penis envy,' positioning the penis as the only sexual organ of recognized value" (1985: 23). Whilst the "noble phallic organ" is a producer of meaning, the woman is always defined with reference to man, as a passive receptacle of meaning, "a hole-envelope that serves to sheathe and massage the penis in intercourse" (ibid.). Against this, *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell* pose Irigaray's later question: "how can we accept the idea that woman's sexual development is governed by her lack?" (1985: 69). Rather, in these films, with Brinkema (2006) we can argue – in a move reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's "desiring machines" (1977: 2), – that female sexuality is productive.[33] Deleuze and Guattari argue against Freudian psychoanalysis in many ways, one being Freud's construction of desire as based on lack; for Deleuze and Guattari, desire is instead 'desiring-production' because "production as process overtakes all idealistic categories" (ibid.: 5). In *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*, female productivity is made visible and we are brought into close material proximity with the products,

[33] Also drawing on Irigaray, Deleuze and Guattari in her analysis of *A Real Young Girl* (Breillat, 1976), Brinkema argues for another alternative to woman and pornography based on lack: "if one model of pornography is about putting things inside, interrogating the interior hidden expanse of woman, Breillat insists on taking things out of her heroine's bodies" (2006: 165).

while male productivity is obscured, de-emphasised and enclosed by the female. Blood, secretions, babies and dildos are all visibly and proximately produced from vaginas, while penises and semen are contained and restricted within vaginas and condoms.

Countering the pornographic emphasis on visible male production in the 'money shot', in *Romance* both Paolo's ejaculation and Paul's impregnating non-ejaculation are inside Marie, with Paolo's ejaculate further contained within a condom. Furthermore, given Paul's chronic inability to achieve an erection, Marie's insemination centres on flaccidity and the man's quasi-inability to actively penetrate, his unerect penis engulfed by Marie's desiring vagina rather than master of it. The only visible genital expulsions in *Romance* are a baby and amniotic fluid: "images of holes being filled [are replaced] by images of spilling out" (Beugnet 2006: 34). *Anatomy of Hell* depicts in close-up a dildo being expelled from a vagina; later, again in close-up, we see blood gush from the woman's vagina and it is the man who is covered in the woman's excretions in a bloody inversion of the 'money shot'. Here the woman is productive and the man is smeared with menstrual blood as the female porn performer is conventionally smeared with semen. Not only do we see the women producing but the close-ups of these productions and their sticky sensations encourage us to feel these products, disturbing the clear distinction between subject-object of the gaze as well as the idea of the pristine untouchable image of a woman. As quoted earlier (Brinkema 2006: 169), *Romance* leaves us 'sticky' and exposed to the products and productivity of women. In this way, proximity confronts us with the productivity of these particular women in order to encourage us to reinterpret women as productive presences rather than lacking absences.

Nonetheless, in *Anatomy of Hell* and *Romance*, there remain several problematic issues that cannot be reinscribed within a progressive feminist viewpoint. These films present distinctly

binarist perspectives on gender and sexuality, insisting on the irreconcilable differences between men and women as well as enforcing a heteronormative discourse on sexuality. In *Romance*, the voiceover makes grand claims about men and women – "women are capable of much more love than men" – which is supported by comments made by Breillat herself, who has decried that men "find it hard to love a woman who is both beautiful and intelligent" (2006: 83) and "women, they truly love men. I'm not sure that men ever love women" (ibid.: 76). While the films challenge how women are presented in a phallocentric society, they are unable to break away from essentialist ideas about gender, which specify two resolutely incompatible genders and nothing else.

Moreover, in *Anatomy of Hell*, it is a homosexual man chosen to watch the woman and yet in the course of the film it is *hetero*sexual genital union that defines the most pertinent and incisive moments of the film, a trait which Downing also recognises in *Romance* when she argues that "films such as *Romance* seem to operate according to the belief that the act of heterosexual genital sex constitutes the ultimate truth of sexuality" (Downing and Saxton 2010: 83). Marie's long musings on the nature of her sexuality take place between Paolo's vaginal penetrations (she rejects his suggestion of anal sex and his earlier request for fellatio) while her Freudian acquisition of her own phallus in the form of a son, which forms the film's climax, takes place during vaginal penetration. Most importantly, the fantasy porn sequence which shows male sexual infatuation with the vagina even during childbirth – comforting at the head but fucking below the waist –, positions vaginal penetration as the 'truth' of sexual relations between men and women. This scene presents the screen which cleaves the women in half as a barrier between appearance and reality, between what men present to the world and the 'truth' of their thoughts about women and female genitalia. As such, heterosexual genital sex becomes *the*

place at which the mysteries, problems and complexities of sexuality are to be understood, rather than just *a place* where they can be investigated.

Romance and *Anatomy of Hell* therefore retain several problematic elements, especially the suggestion that there is a 'truth' of sex or sexuality. In chapter 2, I critiqued this from a Foucauldian perspective arguing that there is no such thing as a 'truth' of sex, arguing that we should focus on the power structures which create and sustain the forms of sexual relations in a society. In terms of feminist change, Irigaray argues that "it is not a matter of toppling that order so as to replace it – that amounts to the same thing in the end – but of disrupting and modifying it" (1985: 68). Suggesting that there is a 'truth' to sex is tantamount to 'replacing' where so much of Breillat's films are engaged in 'toppling'. We should not explain away Breillat's obsession with 'truths' and absolute definitions of gender and sexuality because to do so is to misread new extreme films and their engagement with both progressive and retrogressive politics. This section has, however, shown that the materiality communicated through proximity is a way images can change how we interpret images and concepts. This next section investigates a film which involves perforation as well as touch and penetration, examining another form of the extremity of proximity.

Penetration and perforation – *Trouble Every Day*

Trouble Every Day follows two people, Coré and Shane, who have become infected by a vampyric virus which increases their libido and unleashes an uncontrollable hunger for their lover's flesh. The elliptical narrative structure sometimes makes the plot difficult to comprehend and the film's frequent use of close-ups, lingering long takes and playful digressions,

reduces the importance of narrative progression in the film-viewing experience. In an emblematic scene in the middle of *Trouble Every Day*, a man breaks his way into a boarded-up building where one of the protagonists, Coré, is locked up. They have passionate sex, presented in extreme close-ups and a gently moving camera. The camera tracks across a piece of skin, rotating slowly in extreme close-up, such that we lose orientation and cannot even perceive the person's gender until a male nipple and navel orient us. The only movement is a slight tremor and the subtle undulations of the diaphragm, the only sounds, an aural close-up of excited but quiet breathing. The image cuts to the man's face in close-up, eyes closed in dreamy pleasure. Then a close-up on Coré's hand – she is upright, straddling him – as it runs tantalisingly across the man's chest and up to his arms to grasp his neck and shoulders before the image goes dark as she leans down to kiss his breast. A quiet percussive soundtrack plays.

The dark, fuzzy, close-up images are difficult to discern, and demand that we focus on the minutiae of a tongue flick, a curve of flesh or a sharp intake of breath, which themselves are only barely visible. Eschewing contextualising imagery, we are drawn into the bodies as material beings. The visible and aural proximity draw us into the expectant eroticism of the man's breathing, the arousing caresses of Coré's hands. With the gently increasing volume of the soundtrack, we sense the intensity of the scene and are made to *feel* the progression towards a climax. Coré grabs the man's cheeks forcefully, licking and nipping at his nose, mouth and chin; his breathing intensifies. Coré leans down towards his shoulder, obscuring the frame and a gargled choking sound rings out from the man, a painful or orgasmic cry. The music remains the same. A closer-up shot showing his nose dripping with blood and a more obviously painful cry shows us that it is pain not pleasure. The shot barely shows his eyes and is focussed on his mouth and nose, which are now covered in blood, his cry becoming a scream of agony. We are brought into close contact, both visually and aurally, with the sex and violence of this scene

and encouraged to feel the bodies, their contact, penetration and perforation. This is heightened by the obscurity of many shots (it is sometimes hard to see anything in the darkness) and the decontextualisation of the extreme close-ups.

As well as the transgression of the boundary of the skin, we can see several boundaries with which *Trouble Every Day* engages. This scene as well as a later scene when Shane eats a woman's genitals after performing cunnilingus emphasise the boundary between sex and violence, a boundary which the scenes hover on. In both, the aesthetic and the soundtrack change little while the acts move from consensual pleasure to non-consensual pain. Neither sex nor vampirism are uncommon tropes within mainstream film but here sex is violent and violence eroticised, pushing the images into an *exter* beyond the boundaries of convention, expectation and acceptability. Judith Mayne argues that *Trouble Every Day* shows many images of boundaries being transgressed, not just through sex and violence. She highlights a scene where Coré lies bloodstained on the stairs of her house, where the passage from upstairs to downstairs represents "an invisible boundary line between rationality and desire," a line that Coré has transgressed (2005: 111). Mayne also notes that corridors, places we pass through, are unusually present in the film (ibid.: 112) and that even "the music itself is liminal" (ibid.: 111) where liminality can be linked to extremity because it is "characterised by being on a boundary or threshold" (oed.com, 'liminal' §2). In terms of narrative and genre structures, *Trouble Every Day* finds itself rooted in but transgressing conventional expectations. While a chronological narrative is discernible within *Trouble Every Day*, the film is elliptical, the temporal and causal links between scenes often remaining obscure. Moreover, while it can be described as a vampire film, it does not follow many horror-film conventions. It is in this context that a comment by Mayne becomes especially pertinent: "the film consistently engages with the sense of a

familiar place undone or rendered strange" (ibid.: 111-12). It is both inside boundaries (familiar) and has elements outside (made strange).

The description above shows that *Trouble Every Day* is intimately linked to proximity, from close-ups to the evocation of haptics and the positioning of the camera almost between the lovers. An extreme limit of touch – perforation – plays a recurring role in the film as bits of lovers are bitten into, as sexual caress becomes violent incursion. Looking at three different approaches to *Trouble Every Day*, two which emphasise its engagement with skin, one its links to postcolonialist critique, we can see in these accounts the same ethical framework identified in other new extreme films: affective images of sex and violence, and disorientating or unclear cinematographic and narrative techniques create an encounter with the spectator which demands that they interpret differently images already familiar to them.

Skin itself as much as its perforation, is an abiding concern in new extreme films. As well as being brushed up against and transgressed by the characters, the camera brings the spectator close to skin and encourages us to feel its ruptures, its touch. Throughout *Trouble Every Day*, we see shots of perforated skin being flicked at, bitten, sucked, or cut off, just as we do in *In My Skin*. Several scholars correspondingly discuss the nature of skin, touch and contact in *Trouble Every Day* in ways that offer productive avenues into ethical thought and question ways of conceptualising skin, touch and proximity. Sebastian Scholz and Hanna Surma evoke Didier Anzieu's (1985) idea of the *moi-peau* for its thinking of skin as functioning in three principle ways: as a container, as an interface or border and as a tool of communication (2008: 7–8). As a border this idea of skin has correspondences with theorisations of the extreme: it separates outside from inside, looking inside as the body is "filled up with experiences" and outside to "the development of meaningful relations with persons and objects outside the self"

(ibid.). The breaking of this barrier interests certain theorists rather than intact skin. Commenting about violence and the body in Denis's films, Patricia Pisters suggests that the body "seems to explode into the most extreme and paradoxical attitudes and gestures of love and death, which forces us to think about life, about the limits of life and about its ethical borders" (2003: 85). Meanwhile, McMahon reads *Trouble Every Day* as a demand "in uncomfortably excessive terms, that we probe, feel and think the body" (2012: 127). Kate Taylor explores the film's presentation of infection which takes place at the breakdown of the body, at the borders of plant/animal, body/science, infected/non-infected (2007: 25). *Trouble Every Day* has been analysed by many film scholars but we can see that each mentioned here emphasises the importance of boundaries and the affective exploration of the transgression, penetration and perforation of those boundaries.

Scholz and Surma write of a 'traumatized gaze' and an "irruption of the Real" (2008: 14) while Taylor describes the evocation of the monstrous and the abject as well as noting the central role of "feelings of fear and disgust" (2007: 27). In terms that foreshadow my own, McMahon makes clear links between proximity, the sort of affect outlined above and a challenging form of ethics. McMahon firstly quotes Nancy on proximity: "there is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasises the distance it opens up" (Nancy 2000: 5). This is a form of proximity, intrinsically linked to distance, the other end of the closeness spectrum. McMahon emphasises the repeated use of close-ups throughout *Trouble Every Day* (2012: 128–29) to describe the effect of this proximity as the feeling of a "material thereness of the living, breathing body" which in turn renders "the viewer all the more sensitive to its subsequent mutilation and death" (ibid.: 129). McMahon's analysis can be understood as suggesting that tensions within proximity as a concept, and the proximity evoked between diegetic events and the spectator, can evoke a material engagement with on-screen bodies. This engagement is

nonetheless non-masterful, making us sensitive to that body but leaving it othered and unknown. The affective and proximate imagery, in McMahon's reading, brings us into new and different relations with the film's images. I quote these scholars at length not simply to repeat their ideas, but to demonstrate how my analysis is compatible with many existing interpretations of new extreme films. *Trouble Every Day* is an excellent example of this because it has received scholarly interest from many philosophical standpoints and yet across these interpretations, the ethical framework based upon proximity, extremity, boundaries, provocation, an altered gaze, an evocation of materiality and the denial of mastery is present, implicitly and explicitly in their arguments.

In *Trouble Every Day*, Scholz and Surma describe "the withdrawal of safe entities of visual and symbolic knowledge" and how "everything on screen merges in ambiguous moments not claiming to represent anything" (2008: 14). This echoes – using a different philosophical framework – Beugnet's comments on the decontextualizing power of the close-up (2006: 25) and Downing's description of the ambiguity of sex and violence, pleasure and pain: "the camera's proximity to the bodies throws them into shadow and it is not always clear whose limbs and body parts are whose, or what the interlocked bodies are doing to each other" (2010: 126). Downing's later comment about the "melting away of meaning," (ibid: 131)[34] and Scholz's and Surma's about the undermining of symbolic representation (2008: 14) are both ways of expressing the idea that hegemonic interpretations are being disrupted. This alteration of meaning is achieved through a provocative confrontation with the spectator in the context of erotic and intensely violent imagery, through a 'traumatising' of the gaze (ibid.).

[34] A phrase which echoes Beugnet's description of the 'cinema of sensation' in which "the subjective body appears to melt into matter" (2007: 65).

Any reconsideration of images encouraged by *Trouble Every Day* is intensified by the film's narrative instability and lack of explanation for its challenging imagery. We must search for meaning, devising new ways of looking in order to understand what is going on. Later as recognisable symbols return – a nipple or a navel in the scene above – we can retroactively ascribe meaning to those uncertain images of flesh but in the moment of their perception we must encounter them without conventional cultural contextualisation. Despite coming from different theoretical perspectives, McMahon, Beugnet, Downing, Scholz and Surma all use vocabulary describing ambiguity, indistinctness and a lack of clarity about meaning to describe *Trouble Every Day*'s aesthetic. Such ambiguity is often communicated through the decontextualizing and disorienting effects of close-ups and dark, obscured shots. The importance of such ambiguities is emphasised in the film's opening shots which show a couple, unrelated to the subsequent story, kissing in close-up in an unlit car. The image then fades to black for 22 seconds, before fading into the shimmering reflection of lights on the surface of river water at night, a dark, ambiguous and uncertain image. Beugnet's description of this opening scene highlights the links between proximity, obscurity and materiality: she describes "a threatening, textured obscurity" that "engulfs the lovers" and a "darkness that imposes its presence" (2007: 33). Within the film as a whole, there is no clear way of understanding the images: we are opened up from conventional contextualisations and viscerally attacked in the process but this does not specify a particular way of viewing these images. In terms of the film's ethical and political perspective, this leads McMahon to identify in *Trouble Every Day* a shift from "a penetrative gaze, one which drives for knowledge, to a caressing non-appropriate look which gets up close to the body but leaves complexity undiminished by proximity" (2012: 132–33). McMahon's formulation echoes the ethics I have identified in new extreme films which seek to get closer and to discover more but remain excorporative, never claiming to fully 'know' the subject.

Elsewhere, considering the narrative of France exploiting the natural resources of its former colonies and thereby releasing the lethal infection, Taylor argues that *Trouble Every Day* "shows France not to have been infected by Africa; rather, it is Africa that was infected with colonialism" (2007: 27). While this is "an allegory for colonial exploitation and the moral consequences that follow," (ibid.) it is an affective allegory which challenges the spectator to be unpleasantly inculcated into the problematic colonial misdemeanours of its cannibalistic protagonists. If *Trouble Every Day* is about "economic abuse combined with feelings of fear and disgust" (ibid.) and showing that the infection "is an extreme outcome of normative narratives, or in other words, capitalism at its most beastly" (ibid.: 28) then our visceral engagement with the deep unpleasantness of what Coré and Shane do to people – often the economically misprised (a thief for Coré, a maid for Shane) – is an engagement with the problematic nature of post- and neo-colonialism. We are tormented by the purveyors of global capitalism, those for whom sexual passion and fatal violence merge seamlessly.

I aim to have shown here that previous, philosophically divergent analyses of *Trouble Every Day* highlight the inside-outside operations of extremity and the link that can be made between proximity (and obscurity), affect and an ethics based on a non-recuperative re-interpretation of other's bodies and images of those bodies. We are encouraged to be viscerally engaged rather than coolly detached from the material consequences of neo-colonial engagement in Africa. This is a more specific reading in terms of political context than McMahon, Scholz and Surma but parallels my reading of *Romance*, *Anatomy of Hell* and *In My Skin* in that images of the postcolonial body, as well as discourses around infection, are submitted forcefully to the spectator for reappraisal.

Problems connecting proximity with truth

At this juncture, it is important to note the problematic discourses of 'truth' that have been put forward by certain scholars in relation to several films discussed in this chapter. While the proximity of these films is able to reveal aspects of society which are often hidden and make us question hegemonic or conventional interpretations of bodies, people, objects, acts and images, we should not interpret these revelations as an exposure of a 'truth' of sex, women, touch or pornography. As discussed in chapter 2, we must be wary of any suggestion that ideas can be 'freed up' from a paradigm because such 'liberation' does not preclude the reinscription of those ideas within a different form of that paradigm: indeed thinking we can escape from paradigms is a basic problem.[35] I therefore concur with Phillips's assessment of *Romance*, that the "creation of multiple viewing positions for the female as well as the male spectator are, in the end, far more valuable gifts than the suggestion that the answer might lie in a crudely staged and essentially phallocentric female gaze" (2001: 140). Not only should we avoid the search for a panacea within Breillat's work, but being open to a multiplicity of perspectives is the most fruitful and productive avenue to counter hegemonic discourses: we should not try to overturn particular framings in favour of others but rather to enlarge the interpretative palette of images. Breillat's work cannot deny or refute the common phallocentric interpretations of the female body but *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell* can work to provide alternative schemas, to encourage us to look beyond this limited interpretation. I cited Best and Crowley, Downing and Foucault in the previous chapter to critique *Baise-moi*'s and *Hole in my Heart*'s attempts to reconstitute 'truths' and while films such as *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell* do fall prey to this temptation, it is also important to tackle scholars who claim to find truths in these films.

[35] See Foucault (1978), Irigaray (1985: 68), Downing (2004: 266) and Best and Crowley (2007: 64).

Indeed in a comment especially relevant to the visible sex discussed in this chapter, Ingrid Ryberg cites Linda Williams to argue that a claim to know the truth of sex is inherent to conventional pornography: "hardcore pornography is not phallic only because it shows penises, but because it presumes to know, to possess the truth of sex" (2008: 76; Williams 1999: 267). Thus in Ryberg's terms, one cannot claim both to show the truth of sex *and* be non-pornographic. Nonetheless, in a further comment, which we must take into account when considering the shots of female genitalia in *Anatomy of Hell* and *Romance*, Ryberg argues that a challenge to dominant models of pornography "cannot be performed by way of including more imagery of women's genitals" (2008: 76) because a link between visibility and truth is central to the phallocentric ideology against which the challenge is made.

We should therefore be sceptical of accounts such as Troy Bordun's about *Romance*, who claims to see "real sex" in the film: "it is not a direct presentation, but the really existing thing is presented, set before us, as a fact of reality" (2016). Bordun raises Breillat's transgressions up onto a pedestal – "truth is in making an obscenity" (ibid.) – and thereby searches only to create a new hegemonic discourse of obscenity unhelpfully accepting the existence of 'real sex' and real or natural sexuality. David Vasse provides a hagiographic account of truth claiming that sex "is the unique path of Catherine Breillat's cinema, the path of truth" (2004: 19). Not only does this fail to take into account the Foucauldian and Irigarayan critiques outlined above but they also diminishes the radicality and power of films such as *Romance*. In a controversial piece on *Trouble Every Day*, Nancy similarly argues that the film seeks the "the truth of a body" (2008: 8) and that we gain a glimpse of that which "belongs only to the deep structure, to the real of the kiss" (ibid.: 4). Scholz and Surma consequently suggest that "the truth of the human body appears in the moment of dissection and rupture of its surface" (2008: 12) and that film's "truth, if there is (only) one, appears when the *pellicule* is torn" (ibid: 13). For

Nancy, Scholz and Surma there is a 'truth' value unveiled, unleashed or made visible in the perforation of the skin. Read as such, proximity and its extremes of penetration and perforation become ways of signalling a 'truth' rather than of opening up multiple perspectives as I have suggested.

Countering this discourse of 'truth', McMahon points out that Nancy's argument about "a certain *truth* about touch" (2012: 131) diverges significantly from his theorisation of touch elsewhere, demonstrating the temptation that arises in new extreme films to classify, categorise and bring under control by reinscribing monolithic discourses (such as truth or essence) into films. In a careful Nancean examination of *Trouble Every Day*, McMahon concludes that the film's "ethics of the look-as-caress appear more faithful to a Nancean thought of spacing and separation than Nancy's own reading of the film" (2012: 133). *Trouble Every Day* is engaged in a complex consideration of touch and the body rather than a reductive search for that body's 'essence'. Even as scholars continue to highlight the "dubious and ideological naturalisations of 'reality'" (Davis 2008: 623–24) the pull of 'reality', 'truth' and 'essence' remains strong and the desire to locate and render it unchanging even stronger. Indeed in relation to *Fat Girl*, Ivan Krisjansen and Trevor Maddock argue that "this is the truth about sex, about real sex and not the Hollywood fantasy" (2003: 166). Some of the films do put forward these truth claims but it is important that scholars critique rather than repeating them.

We must also contend with the idea that this focus on a transcendental reality lies not simply in individual theorists' predilections but in the fundamental construction of haptic visuality, which heavily influences numerous accounts of new extreme films, including my own. McMahon contends that fusion, transcendence and a faith in 'truth' lie at the heart of Marks's conception of haptic visuality given the constant if implicit evocation of 'presence'. In Marks's

work, McMahon argues, "touch is emphatically aligned […] with presence, indexicality and certainty. Thus, although one of the aims of Marks's study is 'to point to the limits of sensory knowledge', she simultaneously invests in touch as a repository of intuition, knowledge and truth" (2012: 9). Following Jacques Derrida's argument that "*there is never any pure, immediate* experience of the continuous, nor of closeness, nor of absolute proximity, nor of pure indifferentiation," (Derrida 2005: 125) McMahon contends that there is something problematically Christological about the underlying assumptions of haptic visuality:

> the notion of the haptic – with its promise of proximity, intimacy and communion – may well be invested in a concept of presence which is at root not only metaphysical but specifically Christological. […] invok[ing] Eucharistic notions of incarnation and transubstantiation. […] signal[ling] a desire for communion with the filmic image, a fantasy of hypostatized fusion, remaining implicitly grounded in an ontotheology of being. (McMahon 2012: 22)

Such a reading of hapticity, and therefore the proximity which often facilitates hapticity, is troubling both for its transcendental claims, and because it is linked to a specific form of transcendentalism despite Marks's project being specifically about looking beyond conventional hegemonic approaches to images.

Nonetheless haptic images in new extreme films are only one proximate way of engaging the spectator amongst an arsenal of other techniques including sound design, disorientation, narrative confusion and aggressive forms of editing, which impact on the spectator viscerally without being part of a Marksian haptic visuality. Thus even if there is a transcendent sense of presence implicit in my descriptions of haptic visuality, it is only one method of engaging the

spectator in non-audiovisual ways, rather than *the* method of engagement. Moreover, materiality and haptics are only one effect of the close-up, blurred images we see in *Trouble Every Day*: decontextualisation, disorientation, confusion as well as proximity are just as important effects which are not reliant on problematic implications of presence. Nonetheless, it is useful to bear in mind how 'truth' can implicitly enter into discourses without focussing on veracity or transcendence specifically. Haptic imagery is less prevalent in the final two films discussed in this chapter but the critique of discourses of 'truth' remains pertinent. I now turn to the aggressively proximate imagery of *A Serbian Film*, a film which combines caressing, penetrating and perforating forms of proximity in assaultive fashion.

Pornography and national politics – *A Serbian Film*

A Serbian Film chronicles the return of a former pornstar, Miloš, for one final project which turns out to be a snuff film, orchestrated by Vukmir, in which Miloš is coerced through mind-altering drugs to perform all manner of violent sexual acts. In a scene in which Miloš experiences a flashback to when he raped and beheaded a woman chained to a bed, all the shots are close to the characters and move, hand-held, from side-to-side. We see close-ups on Miloš's trousers as Vukmir's goons remove them, on his ear as an earpiece is inserted, on the handcuffs as the woman is tied to the bed. The camerawork is shaky and blurred as though to show Miloš's perspective, we hear audio close-ups of banging doors and scraping feet, the music has a doom-laden, melody-less feel. The changing close-ups place us in various positions around the room: we identify with Miloš, the woman, the goons, Vukmir. The image cuts to Miloš naked, penetrating the woman vigorously from behind, the earpiece shouting at him. The shots cut between directly in front of or to the side of the woman's face and images from Miloš's perspective as we see bruises and cuts multiplying on her back as Miloš's punches her. Handed a

large knife, Miloš slashes at the woman's neck, after two shots of her looking back at him scared, and an extreme close-up of Miloš's wild eyes; blood spurts up from the knife wound onto the wall. The image cuts to a medium long-shot of Miloš beheading the woman. He keeps on thrusting as blood stains her neck, arms and hands, and drips into a drain underneath the bed. The goons grab Miloš while he is still thrusting and pull him away, one of them kicking her dead body away. The film cuts to Miloš in the present vomiting at this memory.

Although *A Serbian Film* is infamous for the extent of its violence,[36] and scenes such as the one described above draw us proximately into the material mechanics of the violence, there are numerous techniques that distance us from the images and reduce their affect. Many of the scenes of pornography and later scenes of increasingly disturbing violence are viewed on small screens as Miloš watches his own performances on a video camera, while computer screens, cameras and video cameras are ubiquitous. Flashbacks and films within films provide a structural mediation whereby few images of violence are presented in the present tense of the diegesis. Considering one of the most controversial scenes when a newborn baby is raped while its mother looks on smiling, Shaun Kimber notes three ways in which the film's viscerally unpleasant subject matter is distanced from the spectator: careful blocking to hide penetration, structuring the events as a film-within-a-film watched later, and repeated shots both of Miloš's appalled reaction and Vukmir's hyperbolic hysteria. These draw "attention to the highly constructed nature of the film, enabling knowing viewers the opportunity to distance themselves from its content" (Kimber 2014: 113). A similar argument can be made for the other commonly censored scene of suffocation by fellatio, although penetration is seen in close-up detail in this latter case. On the one hand, this demonstrates an engagement with *exter* material, because

[36] It includes rape, murder, sexualised murder, child rape, baby rape, child pornography, incest, necrophilia and torture.

eroticised paedophilia and rape fall well beyond moral, aesthetic and legal boundaries. Nonetheless, we see distinct attempts to limit the extent of the shock and disgust of these acts through techniques which render them more distant, less immediate, bringing them into the realm of acceptability even if on the far edge, the *extremus*. We have elements of both *extremus* and *exter*, challenging us with proximate depictions of extreme events whilst also allowing for our continued viewing. This is what makes the film disturbing without being assaultive enough to make us turn it off; we continue to ask 'why am I still watching this?'. In contrast to films such as *Murder-Set-Pieces* and *August Underground* which also feature numerous acts of sexual violence, there is no push towards the maximal, no attempt to be as violent/visible/proximate/visceral/upsetting as possible. Rather, *A Serbian Film* remains mainly within acceptable norms even if it transgresses the limits of convention and acceptability at times.

In doing this, *A Serbian Film* is seen by scholars to open up new perspectives on national politics in Serbia; I argue that it also asks us to rethink pornographic images. An allegorical link between the diegetic violence and broader societal violences in *A Serbian Film* is made by the director, Srđan Spasojević, when he claims that the film "is a diary of our own molestation by the Serbian government. […] You have to feel the violence to know what it's about" (in Kohn 2010). This explicitly describes the ethical encounter of new extreme films: for Spasojević, graphic and disturbing images of violence both literalise societal violences and affectively challenge the spectator in order for them to interpret the actions of the Serbian government differently, to 'know what it's about'. Similarly, Mark Featherstone and Beth Johnson argue that *A Serbian Film* "exposes the real of Serbian ethno-nationalism to the harsh light of day and makes it entirely dominant over normal symbolic reality" (2012: 66) in an account which uses similar vocabulary to Scholz and Surma when they describe how *Trouble Every Day* "undermin[es] […] mode[s] of symbolic representation" (2008: 14). Featherstone and

Johnson's remarks demonstrate how conventional ways of finding meaning in images of Serbia are disrupted in *A Serbian Film*, enabling other meanings (such as those linked to ethnic violence or nationalist rhetoric) to be visible. Finally, Kimber expresses this sense of a revelatory allegorical nature to the violence, describing the images of *A Serbian Film* as a "rage-filled and uncompromising expression of deeply felt national traumas and renegotiated identities" (2014: 111). Here again, the 'uncompromising' experience of watching the film is linked to the hidden violences of 'national trauma' as well as to the potential for 'renegotiating' perspectives and identities. An ethical project of making the viewer think about the violence that has dogged Serbia for many years is therefore posited by these scholars, an altered gaze achieved through a provocative attack on the spectator and on moral and aesthetic conventions.

Although we must be careful about Featherstone and Johnson's evocation of the 'real' – as though Serbian ethno-nationalism means only one thing or is the only way of understanding Serbian history and politics – we can interpret Kimber's, Featherstone's and Johnson's, and Spasojević's claims as the suggestion of a visceral literalisation of underlying nationalist violences and a making visible of the physical violences in recent Serbian history and modern Serbian society that go unseen. *A Serbian Film* does not reveal the 'truth' of Serbian nationalism but it does make us rethink how we perceive Serbian society. It is for this reason that *A Serbian Film*'s hyperbole is so effective because the film is not supposed to represent Serbia, to provide realistic guidance about what Serbian society looks like but rather to demand that we look below the surface and at what structures that surface. Just like other new extreme films, *A Serbian Film* utilises disorienting and confusing cinematic techniques to destabilise the meaning we might normally attach to particular images to allow for other interpretations of those images and the acts they depict to come to light. Proximity is key to the destabilisation

of meaning because it is the central way in which we are viscerally inculcated in the sex and the violence.

Destabilisation also arises is in the difficulty of characterising *A Serbian Film*'s genre: as Graham Matthews argues, *A Serbian Film* is not "a straightforward political allegory or satire" but rather is uncomfortably positioned in the gap between allegory and "sensationalist horror" (2011: 3). Like in *Trouble Every Day*, it is not clear how to respond to the generic elements of the film. Where generic and narrative conventions can help us to situate ourselves in relation to images we find difficult to comprehend, the absence of a clear genre affiliation means we have a more open choice in deciding how to interpret the images. *A Serbian Film* contains tropes from horror and pornography, spectacle horror and erotic thriller, political plaidoyer and hyperbolic pastiche and yet it is not obviously horror, porn, thriller, politically engaged or a pastiche. A sense of proximity is frequently challenging, unpleasant and uncomfortable in *A Serbian Film* but there are few obvious hints about its affiliation to high or low culture to guide us in how to react to its images. Rather we are asked to reflect on these images which confront us, for ourselves.

Another means of destabilisation is the constant putting into question of the spectator's act of looking. Within the diegesis of *A Serbian Film*, many sex scenes are filmed diegetically and the cameras are also present within the frame, our attention being drawn to them because of how unusual it is to see filming equipment in fiction films. The repeated presence of cameras, screens, phones and projectors highlight our act of spectatorship because different ways of looking are an integral part of the narrative. Referring to *A Serbian Film*'s emphasis on spectatorship, Matthews argues that engaging with the film's horror and porn tropes reveals "the construction of […] clinical practices of observation and diagnosis" as well as examining "the

relationship between subjectivity and the gaze in both film and medicine" (2011: 5). The act of looking is thematised and problematised: the act of looking is turned back onto the viewer so that we are forced to contend with the problematic aspects of our own spectatorship. It is not simply the 'evil' characters that are responsible for the events in the film but the regime of looking that we, as viewers, are engaged in while viewing the film. The notion of the gaze is problematised not simply in a metaphorical, symptomatic way but in the act of watching. As Miloš watches the images on the camera, we watch those same images on a camera and are thus implicated in the images, just as Miloš feels he is. As we see the camera crew filming Miloš, we get footage from those cameras. Thus, we occupy the position of those who orchestrate the violence, and realise that whatever pleasure we may experience from the film depends on the filming undertaken by these people: "consequently, *A Serbian Film* should be read as a film primarily concerned with the representational strategies which influence the seemingly neutral gaze" (ibid.: 10). Matthews' analysis also draws the unpleasant affect of the film together with a political message, albeit a Foucauldian rather than the Serbian nationalist one put forward by Featherstone and Johnson. Moreover, in his comparison with the play *Blasted* (Kane 1995), which he sees as "implicat[ing] the audience in its critique," (2011: 3) Matthews points out that the gaze in *A Serbian Film* is not just an abstract, conceptual one, but actually the gaze of the spectator watching at that moment. Not only is the film's critique presented through a provocative, proximate confrontation with the spectator but that confrontation implicates the viewer in the gaze which is critiqued.

A Serbian Film uses its provocative and affectively charged images to challenge the spectator, both to look again at the images and to see ourselves as implicated in the construction of such images, whether it be the interconnected violences of Serbian ethnonationalism, the violences of pornography or the complex machinations of Foucauldian power relations and the medical

gaze. Importantly, in view of my previous comments on the pitfalls of 'truth', this gaze has a disjointed, pluri-focused dimension: "rather than producing a 'well spoken' criticism of the gaze, Spasojević creates a rhizomatic image of the subject which strains towards the limits of decency, commonsense and the language of cinema" (ibid.: 17). *A Serbian Film* sprouts roots in various debates to undermine common ways of viewing Serbia, the gaze or pornography by placing the debate at the edges of acceptability (*extremus*) and sometimes beyond (*exter*).

This mention of pornography brings us to an aspect of *A Serbian Film* which is surprisingly overlooked in the scholarly literature and provides a thematic link between *A Serbian Film* and *In My Skin*, *9 Songs*, *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell* through their employment of the choreography of pornography. *A Serbian Film* firstly makes a keen distinction between sex and pornography, which are presented very differently. Secondly and linked to *A Hole in my Heart*, *A Serbian Film* posits considerable links between pornography and violence.

In an early scene in the marital bed, Marija asks her husband, Miloš, why their sex is different from his sex with the porn performers in his films, to which he answers, "well I love you; I just fucked them". To demonstrate the difference, Miloš grabs Marija's hair and in a series of quick shots, rips her shirt revealing her breasts, twists her onto her front, penetrates her from behind, and thrusts vigorously while holding her head down. Close-ups show her clenched knuckles as she clings to the bed, gasping in pain, the soundtrack is grinding and bass-filled. Violins enter the soundtrack and Miloš slows down, leaning to kiss her gently. The softer notes overcome the soundtrack's aggressive tones as we cut to a shot of the porn film they had been watching, showing Miloš penetrating someone from behind. The image cuts to Marija on her back; Marija enjoys this sex, coming slowly to a climax. The television set still shows angry Miloš vigorously penetrating a different woman, a scene now in complete contrast to the sex in the bed. A

clear contrast is made here between the 'fucking' of pornography and the 'making love' of romantic sex. Miloš's aggressive facial expressions in the video and when 'fucking' his wife explicitly link pornography with violence and aggression. While sexual desire is not criticised, (the parents reassure their son that his arousal at watching a porn film is normal) sexuality as manifested in pornography is criticised throughout.

A later scene, when Miloš's brother, Marko, is fellated by a sex worker (filmed with aural but not visual close-ups), critiques the pervasive influence of pornography on society. Marko receives fellatio while talking to Miloš on the phone and watching a home video of his nephew's birthday, which cuts to a scene from one of Miloš's porn films. At this point, the prostitute stops to watch the video as Marko makes self-deprecating remarks about Miloš's sexual prowess. Pornography has become inextricably linked to the everyday: a boy's birthday party is fitting visual material for a sexual encounter, while the filmic encounters are more satisfying than the physical relations. Initially the sex worker complains about Marko's flaccidity, but once watching the porno film, she forgets such exigencies, snuggling up to Marko, touching her nipples, aroused by Miloš's virtual presence more than Marko's actual presence. This scene suggests that real physical relations have been undermined by virtual relations to porn performers. In *A Serbian Film*, pornography is both divergent from sex and a negative influence on physical sexual relations. Proximity and its extreme, penetration, are integral to these scenes as the characters undertake vaginal and oral penetration as well as caressing each other: hands run across cheeks and chests. Proximity to the spectator is also key, we come close in visual and aural close-ups while the sound in the first scene is loud, enveloping us in this proximate situation.

Having separated sex from pornography, pornography is then shown to be intrinsically linked to and inseparable from violence, much like in *A Hole in my Heart*. *A Serbian Film* begins with footage of one of Miloš's conventional porn films, in which Miloš employs violent verbal imagery such as 'I'm going to fuck you up'.[37] This sense of violence is reiterated by the traumatised son, revealed as the viewer of this diegetic film, when he describes Miloš as 'beating' his 'friend'. Moreover, when sexual violence in *A Serbian Film* is enacted using the choreography of pornography: the positions that the actors take during sexual acts. Bodily positions conventionally linked to spectatorial arousal are used in images of sexual violence: *A Serbian Film* makes strange and exaggerates images which have become commonplace. Namely: pornography as pleasure becomes pornography as violence. In the scene where a woman is raped and beheaded, we see common visual tropes from heterosexual pornography, which also appear in the diegetic porn film, *Milosh the Filthy Stud*, watched by Miloš's son in the opening sequence. For instance, the 'doggy-style' (where a woman is penetrated from behind while on all fours) with the woman's mouth open is common to pornography as can be seen in *Milosh the Filthy Stud*. Similarly, we see the woman looking at the man over her shoulder whilst the man's torso is outside the frame as well as the woman's head being pushed down against the mattress with the man's torso again beyond the frame, shots which resemble the positions in internet porn videos. We see this affinity to the pornographic body positions in other images from the film such as an early scene from the diegetic snuff film when a woman on her knees has her head grabbed by a man and pulled towards his crotch; and subsequently when she crawls 'seductively' in high heels towards Miloš. These images show how the sex and seduction sequences in *A Serbian Film* are choreographed in such a way as to create great similarities between the sometimes unusual positions adopted in pornographic films and *A Serbian Film*'s images depicting rape, murder, coercion, battery and incest.

[37] Spoken in English.

Now, pornographic choreography is likely to appear in a diegetic porn film and indeed some of these positions are not intrinsically pornographic. However, these positions are some of those most commonly associated with pornography and those most connoted with emotionless male fucking, male power and female sexual submissiveness rather than loving, mutually pleasurable encounters. The women are on their knees, grabbed by their hair, pushed to the floor and faced away from the men to disavow their faces' humanising effect. Furthermore as in many pornographic shots, the frame in *A Serbian Film* often cuts off Miloš's head to allow greater focus on the naked female body. We gain fragmented close-ups of the women's faces and bodies, and the women have their mouths open in the stereotypical picture of pornographic female pleasure. In this disturbing conflation, we are encouraged to see these violent pornographic scenes as literalising the violence and coercive male power of pornography: by chaining the woman down or beating her face until she adopts 'sexy' positions and performs fellatio, the film literalises the non-physical coercions that female porn performers are subjected to on set. In being affectively drawn into the sexual violence, we are asked to question our responses to pornography and thereby to reconsider the nature of pornography.

Such presentations put forward a Dworkinian link between porn and violence, for Andrea Dworkin argues both that "pornography *is* violence against women" (1993: 207) and that "pornography reveals that male pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting" (1989: 69). For *A Serbian Film*, the pornographic sex act cannot be divorced from male violence and while the film does not condemn all heterosexual sex acts – Miloš's and Marija's loving sex is aesthetically separate from this – pornography is condemned without caveat. In fact, other violent sexual encounters in the film can be read as supporting Dworkin's contention that "pornography says that women are the things men use" and only considers "women as

body parts" (1989: 203–4). When a woman has all her teeth removed, she is reduced to a fellation-object, only useful inasmuch as she provides a receptacle for a man's penis or in Irigaray's terms, 'a penis sheath' (1985: 23). When this woman is then choked to death on said penis, her violent death reiterates the violence which the pornographic tropes of coercive fellatio inflict upon women. Whereas the image of a woman's open legs during birth is recuperated in *Romance* away from pornography, *A Serbian Film* exaggerates the vision that *Romance* critiques. The vagina and a woman's open legs are shown as being always and only sexualised in *A Serbian Film* as a man attends a birth with an erect penis. That this sexualisation is not limited to the woman and implicates the next generation, is emphasised in brutal fashion when the man rapes the ensuing baby as if to show that nothing can escape the phallocentric violence of pornography, which is literally inflicted on the newborn baby. *A Serbian Film* literalises the cultural violence that anti-pornography campaigners locate both in the porn studios vis-à-vis the real women being paid for sex and in the pornographic image; the filmed visible sexual image is inherently intertwined with male violence, whose destructive influence permeates all forms of life. As with *A Hole in my Heart*, this is problematic in conjecturing that pornography can only be seen through the lens of violence, creating a monolithic view of this topic even as much of the film enacts a 'rhizomatic' (Matthews 2011: 17) critique of viewing regimes. At the same time, it demonstrates once again how new extreme films use techniques of proximity and an evocation of materiality to focus on the specific mechanisms of sexual and violent acts in order to make us reinterpret certain images: in this case, pornography.

A Serbian Film therefore uses proximate techniques as well as fast editing, loud sounds, gory horror effects and erotic body positions to provoke an affective reaction in the spectator and make us feel up close to, and viscerally implicated in, acts of sexual violence and sex. Such confrontational strategies challenge us to reconsider the meanings we attribute to these images

and to reconsider how we interpret pornography and Serbian national politics. The film moreover makes it clear that our viewing regime structures these networks of power and therefore, like in other new extreme films, it is precisely in watching that the act of watching is placed in question.

Extirpation – *Taxidermia*

Taxidermia is divided into three parts: the first follows Morosgoványi, a badly treated private in the Second World War under fascist rule in Hungary. Lonely, maltreated and bored, he escapes into a world of ambiguous sexual fantasy replete with images of his lieutenant's young daughters, wife and pig as well as episodes where he ejaculates flames and masturbates through a hole in a shed wall. The second part follows his presumptive son, Kálmán, a competitive speed-eater in communist Hungary. We see long close-ups of Kálmán and his opponents stuffing their faces with foods and vomiting it up between rounds. Kálmán elopes with fellow speed-eater Gizi and they are both courted by the communist authorities as national celebrities. In the third section Kálmán has grown into a whale of a man who cannot even stand. He is looked after by his emaciated son Lajoska who is a taxidermist in capitalist Hungary. Kálmán's pet cats escape one day and eat the defenceless Kálmán. Lajoska stuffs his father and cats before using a homemade machine to remove all his own organs, preserve and stuff his body before removing his own head and right arm, a process shown in lingering close-ups. An epilogue set in a pristine white future shows these corpses as museum pieces vaunted as the pinnacles of early 21st-century art. I focus on the aesthetics of the first part but the close-up images of vomit and food in the second part and the removal of organs in the third easily provides examples for my argument that *Taxidermia* also functions according to the ethical framework of new extreme films, and can especially be seen in its evocation of proximity.

The linkage between a visceral, sensorial engagement with the spectator and a re-interpretation of the meaning attached to concepts such as history, politics and power can be seen in the scholarly accounts of *Taxidermia*. György Kalmár, for instance, identifies the evocation of a "culturally specific, local sensorium in order to undermine the ideologically laden grand narratives of a homogenized, official History" (Kalmár 2014: 203).[38] Steven Shaviro describes the challenging difficulty of positioning *Taxidermia* within conventional historical or psychological schemas because "these body-images are immediately visceral, and indeed disgusting; and yet they are also abstract and allegorical" (2012: 11). Just as Matthews contends that *A Serbian Film* fails to communicate "a 'well spoken' criticism of the gaze," (2011: 17) Shaviro argues that "this conflict between visceral intensity and allegorical distance, or between vulgar bodily content and abstract, schematic form, is itself the whole point of *Taxidermia*" (2012: 11–12). The difficulty of finding a comfortable way of interacting with the images, of discovering the film's 'message', is not a failure but rather how *Taxidermia* operates. We are pulled back and forth between affective proximity and allegorical distance, a movement that Marks describes as erotic (2002: 13–14). In *A Serbian Film* and *Taxidermia*, their allegorical messages are to be read through the moments of viscerally disturbing violence, rather than separate from them. Proximity is integral to this in *Taxidermia*, firstly because so many of the depicted acts involve touch, penetration and later, perforation and extirpation (firstly in the vomit, then the organ removal). Secondly, the visceral affect described above is predominantly evoked using proximate techniques such as close-ups, disorienting cinematography, decontextualisation and enveloping soundscapes. Given the many modal ambiguities created by erect penises and disgusting imagery such as vomit, overfeeding and bodily dissection, the political critique is put forward through the spectator's encounter with the visible proximity of the film's images.

[38] Kalmár uses History with a capital to designate the grand narratives and institutionally supported interpretations of the past.

The allegory of Hungarian history in *Taxidermia* is writ large as we watch the different characters coming to terms with the fascist, socialist and capitalist societies in which they find themselves. At the same time, phantasmatic sequences of a man copulating with a pig carcass and ejaculating fire, disorienting scenes shot with rotating cameras, close-ups of obese men vomiting, and detailed shots of a man surgically removing his own organs speak aggressively to the spectator's body, to a visceral encounter with film. The opening images of *Taxidermia* are extreme close-ups of a candle as a giggling man runs his hands and mouth around its flame, bringing it close to his nipples and singeing his chest hair. We cannot see his eyes, just the breeze of the candle across skin, the man's harelip below a slight moustache and a constant changing of the plane of focus that leaves the image blurred before the camera zooms into the flames that dance, reduced to shapes, which turn out to emanate from the man's penis. Later, as the man, Morosgoványi, chops wood outside, extreme close-up images of two teenage girls bathing are shown: napes, hair, nipples, skin all dripping with water. This is intercut with close-ups of the wood being chopped and medium shots of the lieutenant talking to Morosgoványi. Again, the images of washed skin move in and out of focus – now we see a reverse shot of Morosgoványi watching them through a window thus focussing on the act of watching as he might get caught.

The film immediately creates intense sensory imagery, mainly touch, related to skin, water, wood and faces, which continues throughout the film with smell and taste emerging as important sensations in the speed-eating competitions. Later when Morosgoványi is fantasising about copulating with the lieutenant's wife, his sexual play with a candle is intercut with close-ups of a pig carcass in the bath. He undresses and lies down on top of the woman, kissing her breasts and making pig-like noises. She licks her lips and runs her fingers round in them which is intercut with static close-ups of the dead pig. He pauses and grabs her face then suddenly

begins thrusting wildly, which we see from various angles including behind, displaying penetration, and close-ups on his hands as he grasps at bits of meat. A reverse shot of the woman's face reveals only vague bits of fat; each time his shoulders cover her face with his thrusting, different images emerge behind it: the mother, both of the daughters, bits of pig. A shot from above shows him clutching the pig as he climaxes with a shriek. Throughout this opening section, we are brought into close proximity and contact with various bodies: with Morosgoványi as he washes in freezing water, the girls' skin which arouses him, the meat as it is besmirched. Other sections detail his paedophilic fantasies about the young girl, a chicken pecking at his penis as he masturbates through a greased hole in a cabin wall, several longer takes of Morosgoványi's servile existence and an astonishing shot which rotates vertically around the bath tub as its uses over many years dissolve into one another. Moreover, we see extreme close-ups of Morosgoványi's eyes, often through the slats in the cabin, as he watches as well as that which he is watching, obscured, from his position, by the slats. Adding to this the several slow zooms out of enclosed spaces, and the sense of his and our voyeurism is potent, the fact of our spectatorship emphasised. There is such a sensory overload, such an excess of sensation and so much of it (at least in this first section) connoted in erotic and sexual terms that there is little respite from the intensity of images of sex, violence, paedophilia and bestiality.

Rewording Shaviro's comments in terms of extremity, we can see several aspects of *Taxidermia* that are concomitant with new extreme films. Shaviro argues for instance that in the film "there is no mediating term in between the social regime (fascism, socialism, or capitalism) and the flesh that exemplifies and suffers from it" (2012: 12), this lack of mediation is reconfigured onto the body of the spectator as the visceral reactions of disgust, arousal, shock and touch reduce the distance between spectator and screen, and thus between the fleshy configurations of the spectator and the political regimes depicted. Shaviro points out that the rapid

alternation between close-ups and long shots in the early scenes of masturbatory ritual mean that despite becoming intimate with Morosgoványi, "we never get a sense of him as a feeling and inwardly reflecting subject […] we empathise with Morosgoványi's sufferings, and with his desperation, but he remains too strange and alien for us to "identify" with him" (2012: 3). We are encouraged to become proximate to, and intimate with, the characters, that is, to consider their positions, actions and environment but nonetheless maintain the 'excorporative' engagement that Silverman finds necessary in an ethical engagement with a subject (1996). We encounter Morosgoványi in a bodily way, but this does not lead to the suggestion that we 'know' him or that we have somehow discovered the 'truth' of life in fascist Hungary.

Indeed for Kalmár, the undermining of hegemonic historical narratives, is the productive aspect of *Taxidermia*; he argues that rather than "dissolv[ing] human beings and human stories in a phenomenal world of sensory experiences," the film "undermines hegemonic discourses about humans (and especially masculinities) by its haptic images and unusual perspectives" (2014: 209). Furthermore, and what links *Taxidermia* to new extreme films such as *Battle in Heaven* or *Fat Girl*, is the material, haptic depiction of 'non-idealisable bodies' countering idealised representations which "regard[] the bodily, the physical, the material, and the visible as secondary to the spiritual, non-material, and non-visible" (ibid.). In all these films the material, physical existence of individual people rather than stereotypical representations is emphasised. Although characters such as Anaïs, Markos and Morosgoványi are meant to have allegorical weight, the films' focus on their sensations, how they physically interact with others, reinstates the primary importance of lived experience in constructing historical narratives. For Kalmár, this is about the rereading of History as the histories of individual experiences rather than as all-encompassing national narratives, but this equally describes Breillat's attempts to focus attention away from particular narratives (e.g. around romance or rape) and towards the material,

physical encounter. In *Taxidermia*, we are, through various corporeal techniques, being challenged about the links between politics and the body in order to make us look again at how we interpret History. For Kalmár, this opens the possibility for an engagement with non-hegemonic discourses; for Shaviro, *Taxidermia* "'cognitively estranges' us from our sense of capitalism as the end of history," (2012: 10) thus suggesting that Western audiences might see alternatives to capitalism as the unavoidable conclusion of history.

The affective engagement of the spectator in disturbing and disgusting imagery and the intense proximity of these images is part of *Taxidermia*'s attempt to encourage its spectators to interpret the past differently, shedding a different light on the same facts. *Taxidermia* is predicated on aggressively engaging the spectator in affective and eroticised images of extreme events such as paedophilia and bestiality, visible sex and bodily mutilation. The disorienting and confusing camerawork makes it difficult to make yourself comfortable or to form any stable base from which to observe events, which is rendered even more difficult by the sudden shifts in time. We are encouraged to question the nature of the acts that the characters undertake and the reasons for presenting them in this way through our visceral engagement with their bodies, even as we are repulsed by their dirty sexual habits, regurgitated lunch or creepy hobbies. It is not simply an allegory nor a hyperbolic pastiche; rather, the film's evocation of proximity and materiality engages us closely with Hungarian politics and the construction of historical narratives.

New extreme proximity

This chapter demonstrates how an exploration of proximity in new extreme films yields similar conclusions to those drawn after an examination of the role of visibility in the same corpus of films. We can see how these films also put forward an ethics grounded in the challenging evocation of the *exter* and the *extremus* where we are viscerally pushed to the edges of what is acceptable and at times beyond it, where we engage with sensations at the limit of what we can tolerate as well as things which we cannot or will not tolerate. While this assaultive affect evokes the material existence of the characters and the physical experience of their violent and/or sexual actions, we rarely come to identify with the characters, to embody them. The preference is for external witnessing of their predicaments, an accompaniment along their journey which is often told in resolutely non-psychological narrative styles which follow their actions but do not reveal the motivations and emotions behind them. We are brought close into the intimacy of Esther's cutting in *In My Skin*, Morosgoványi's fantasies in *Taxidermia* and the woman's bodily investigations in *Anatomy of Hell* because "proximity to the sufferer gives rise to moral reasons" (Nortvedt and Nordhaug 2008: 158). Psychologically distanced, however, from the characters, this proximity cannot "congeal into a tyrannizing essence" (Silverman 1996: 2) that we can claim to know, understand and incorporate into our own models of thought. In being forced close, too close, and being pushed away again, in that movement we can define as erotic, we are often unable to discern quite what is being shown. We are led to experience ostensibly conflicting emotions as violence is eroticised and sex made violent, we are encouraged to focus on alternative aspects of the image and to interpret that image differently. We might see the materiality of sex, the physicality of violence or re-interpret woman as productive rather than lacking, history as an amalgam of individual histories rather than a single institutional discourse.

Taking us into some unpleasant affective territory, this chapter also demonstrates how broad the political topics are on which this ethics of extremity has been focussed; feminism, national politics, post-colonialism, pornography and capitalism all come under scrutiny using the same assaultive schema. In being brought close and exposed to the materiality of depicted acts, we are challenged, attacked, provoked in order to look at the same images from new perspectives and see the cultural constructions which govern our judgements of those images, the societal presumptions that lead us to view them in one way rather than another and the hidden violences which suddenly become visible, proximately so. At the same time, like the films from chapter 2, the films discussed here often remain provocative, indulging in retrogressive interpretations of gender politics, hackneyed tropes from conventional pornography and attempting to assert monolithic ideologies by promoting a sense of 'truth'. These films' use of proximity therefore can be as problematic as the use of visibility in chapter 2. Our proximity to the characters' proximity has the power to make us rethink how we find meaning in images but the new meaning found can be both progressive and retrogressive.

Chapter 4 – Duration

The long take and the long scene are frequently occurring stylistic devices in new extreme films and are often paired with a film's most shocking, explicit or violent material. These means of communicating extended duration feature in sex scenes in *Romance, Battle in Heaven, Trouble Every Day* and *Fat Girl*; rape scenes in *Irreversible*, *Twentynine Palms* and *Free Will*; fellatio in *The Brown Bunny* and *Battle in Heaven*; and self-mutilation in *Taxidermia* and *In My Skin*; murder in *A Serbian Film, Irreversible*, *Antichrist* and *Sombre*. Critical and scholarly work on these films refers repeatedly to long sequences and long takes while regularly discussing the ethical and political consequences of sex and/or violence seen in protracted duration. Williams, for instance, writes that "what is new [in *Fat Girl*] is the remarkable combination of duration with apparent explicitness," (2007: 10); Grønstad contends that in *Irreversible*, "there is little narrative or compositional motivation for showing this kind of cruelty in its actual duration" (2011: 202); while Kimber claims that "the use of extended takes focusing on highly sexualized violent content" makes *A Serbian Film*'s oral rape scene "one of the most disturbing" moments in a film already containing many affectively unpleasant sequences (2014: 113). Building on

Horeck's assertion that "time and duration are central to the new French extremism and the attempt to involve the spectator," (2010: 203) this chapter examines why temporality and duration are integral to understanding new extreme films. Following Donato Totaro's suggestion that in the long take, "the thought process can peak at any moment within the shot, and often gains in intensity precisely as a result of duration," (2002: n.p.) I demonstrate how the evocation of duration, especially through the long take, is part of the ethical framework outlined in chapter 1.

This chapter examines what we take away from the experience of viewing extremity in extended duration. What impact does the duration of the scene or the slower editing pace have on the spectator? Scholarship on 'slow cinema' gives some suggestions about links that can be made between duration and politics. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge argue that:

> in a world where speed is the normative ideological paradigm underpinning late capitalism's economic labour systems, social values and the contemporary audiovisual and cultural regimes, slowness necessarily intervenes in wider political debates insofar as it speaks to this paradigm and opens up a space to look at, reassess and question these systems, values and regimes from a new sensory-perceptual prism. (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016: 15)

Although I am not looking at questions of slowness, this quotation productively links the long take or the speed of editing with alternative ways of perceiving images. Referring to 'slow' films in this edited collection, Grønstad contends that duration also has ethical potential: "while duration as a temporal mode and experiential frame might not necessarily be ethical in and of itself, it nevertheless provides a condition of possibility for intrinsically ethical acts, such as

recognition, reflection, imagination and empathy" (2016: 274). While my corpus is quite different from most 'slow' films, the fact that many long takes and the spectator's continuing awareness of the passage of time are mentioned repeatedly in de Luca and Barradas Jorge's edited collection, means that there are overlaps in the experiences of watching new extreme films and 'slow' films. The recognition, reflection and empathy that Grønstad refers to as the ethical acts which 'slow cinema' might encourage, foreshadow my description of the ethics of new extreme films, because they also incite reflection about acts, images and the spectator's complicity within these. This chapter argues that techniques of duration in new extreme films demand that we reflect upon alternative interpretations of images, that there is a recognition of the characters' plight, and of the acts they engage in, without congealing into an assumption of 'knowing' the objects of our gaze. To demonstrate this ethical engagement with the spectator, this chapter considers questions of realism in *Irreversible*, trauma in *The Brown Bunny* and *Free Will* and witnessing in *Fat Girl*, *Romance* and *Twentynine Palms*, emphasising the centrality of duration in communicating these concepts and the ethical conclusions we might draw. The chapter concludes with an examination of heteronormative sexuality in *Antichrist* and social class and body politics in *Battle in Heaven*.

Duration – Extremity – Ethics

The emphasis placed on the *process* of time passing in new extreme films echoes philosopher Stanley Keeling's thinking on duration, a concept which he splits into 'unitary' and 'processive'. Unitary duration is oriented towards reductive descriptions of the time elapsed between two points in history, while processive duration denotes the moment-by-moment playing out of the time between those two points. Processive duration takes account of the experience of

the duration, of the chronological positioning of different events within the period, of the development of a person or event from one situation to another. Keeling gives the following example:

> we may think of a man now dead when we think of his existence *as a whole*, a single duration limited, say, by his birth and his death: a unity so constituted. Or, again, we also think of his existence *processively*, as it was lived through in time by him. But the one, though it has the same 'content' as the other, is not the same in the respect that the latter is further determination of the former. The man's life *as a unitary whole* limited by his birth and death *is unalterably* what it is. But that *same* life was *also* processive, *ever altering*, from birth to death. (Keeling 1991: 6; emphasis in original)

Unitary duration denotes duration as fixed, something that can be described objectively from a distance by others. In the case of a person's life, such duration is used by those who are still alive to designate that person's time on earth. It is a statement of fact, an assertion of *being*, a numerically categorisable period ('5 minutes'). Processive duration, by contrast, denotes duration as a process, as describing the mutable characteristics of a person's life. It entails a more subjective sense of time passing, the person's experience of each further second elapsing. It hints towards personal experience, towards the *becoming* of an event, towards the individual elements in a process which are later understood as a unitary whole.

For Keeling, these two types of duration are applicable to any period of time because every time period includes stages and processive development as well as a unitary existence as 'this period of time'. Indeed Keeling suggests that vernacular usage of 'life' and 'existence' implies both forms of duration, shifting implicitly and explicitly between the unitary and processive without necessarily being aware of it (ibid.). Long scenes and long takes can point towards processive duration by showing what constitutes the unitary whole of an event. Anything which

draws our attention beyond the fact that something is happening, to the passing of time during that event, highlights processive duration. New extreme films draw particular attention to processive duration by removing aspects of film which can distract our attention away from the passing of time. Camera movements, dialogue, changes in the depicted acts, changes in focus, zooms and extra-diegetic music can all draw our attention away from the passing of time towards action, other objects or people, emotions and narrative developments. If, however, these are kept to a minimum, processive duration can be emphasised. That certain long takes in new extreme films encourage us to consider processive duration is highlighted in a comment made about the rape scene in *Irreversible* an audience member:

> I must admit that I have a somewhat sadistic streak in me and was initially aroused by the first 30 seconds of the rape. But then it just kept going. And going. By the end I just wanted it to stop. I wasn't turned on, just horrified that I'd felt that way. (in Barker and others 2007: 161)

This comment demonstrates firstly, that the viewer is aware of the process of the rape, as he highlights stages in it (the first 30 seconds, the end) rather than only referring to the whole; secondly, that the length of the scene, its duration, is noticeable, indeed palpable (it just kept going… and going); and finally that he is aware of the processive development of his own reactions to the scene, which go through at least three different stages: arousal, not arousal, horror. This viewer is aware of the different temporal stages in this scene, depending on the particular moment in the process of rape, the length of uncomfortable time that has passed and his feeling of horror or arousal at that moment.

Henri Bergson also identifies a difference between two ways of appreciating the same time period in his idea of *durée* as opposed to scientific time. As Mark Muldoon notes, Bergsonian

"real duration [*durée réelle*] is not a measure of life, it is life in its unmeasured movement of ceaseless qualitative change and constant invention" (2006: 81). This is contrasted with scientific or 'clock' time which is quantitatively repeatable: in clock time, time is only understood as a quantity and therefore any two-second period is equal to any other for experimental purposes. For Bergson such repeatability completely ignores the qualitative aspects of *durée* whereby everything is qualitatively unrepeatable because every instance is subtly different, even a repeated song, phrase or quotation. Bergson argues that "even the simplest psychic elements possess a personality and life of their own […] they are in a constant state of becoming, and the same feeling, by the mere fact of being repeated is a new feeling" (1950: 200). Attuned to the minutiae of an event we are encouraged to experience the qualitative differences of passing moments. As the viewer quoted above demonstrates, a second towards the end of the scene is different from a second at the beginning. All the moments in a scene cannot be indiscriminately categorised together as part of 'a rape scene' because they evoke different qualities specific to a moment. Bergson's and Keeling's accounts can be usefully brought together because their terminology to describe alternatives to 'clock' time is similar: Bergson writes of duration as the "continuous evolution" of a person (1950: 229) while Keeling describes the "ever-altering" process of life (1991: 6). Many films can do this but the evocation of processive duration is often made clear in new extreme films by a lack of distracting devices. This becomes part of a new extreme ethical framework because we are encouraged to engage with the processive elements of sex and violence, and their distinctive qualities.

Long shots and long scenes shot from almost static positions are commonly used in new extreme films for several reasons. Firstly, there is increased spectatorial engagement with the action. Just as I suggested in chapter 3 that proximity focuses our attention on individual elements of an act by obscuring context and showing details about an act we rarely see, so does

this chapter suggest that certain forms of duration emphasise a person's steps, their blows, or the thrusts of penetration rather than just the unitary idea of sex or violence. Secondly, there is a feeling of authenticity evoked by being privy to the processive duration of events: were we there, we could not edit any parts out or condense them into a few minutes of film. Thirdly, authenticity can evoke the feeling of being a witness to these events. Witnessing conventionally holds significant legal and moral weight, with witnesses called to courts of law, and testimonies of atrocities used to warn against their recurrence. Fourthly, exposure over a long period of time to the processive duration of unpleasant acts tests our endurance, our willingness to continue to expose ourselves to images. We ask ourselves why we continue to watch, what we gain from these images which remain on our screen for so long. This leads to unpleasant viewing experiences which give us insight into the sufferings and pleasures of the characters whilst emphasising our position as spectator. These engagements with an act's qualitative elements and processive duration encourage us to see alternative meanings in acts and their images, and to appreciate our complicity in them.

Processive duration – *The Tribe*

A single take of 5 minutes 48 seconds closes *The Tribe*, a film composed entirely of extremely long takes, and with dialogue entirely in Ukrainian sign language (although this final scene contains no dialogue at all).[39] The camera changes its distance to the characters but most shots are medium and long shots with only a few closer shots. Following a new arrival, Sergey, at a deaf school, *The Tribe* documents his initiation into and subsequent relations with a brutal gang. In the final scene, after having been assaulted and left for dead by members of the gang, a single take observes Sergey enter the main building and slowly, metronomically, climb the

[39] All the characters are completely deaf and there is no indication they can hear anything.

stairs to the dormitories. The repetitive heavy steps give the sequence a slow rhythm and a sense of inexorability, while the upturned camera angle necessary to film from below in a stairwell, an angle which lessens as the cameraperson reaches the longer flat sections between each flight of stairs, emphasises our sense of following Sergey, accompanying him and witnessing his actions. This slow unhurried pace is maintained as he walks into a twin room, pauses between the sleeping occupants, before picking up a bedside table and bringing it down forcefully three times on one of the boy's heads. Sergey slowly turns to the other boy and repeats this action. In each case, blood spurts onto the pillows, their arms hang limp and the camera remains static in the doorway. Walking out of the room, we follow him as he undertakes the identical manoeuvre on two other boys in the neighbouring room, completed at exactly the same slow, calculated pace, filmed from the same position in the doorway. Sergey leaves this room, walks at the same pace back to the stairwell and closes the door behind him, his steps down the stairs reverberating over the end credits.

It is an intense scene, especially when he leaves the first room and we can anticipate his murderous actions towards the second pair, and this intensity is maintained through the lack of editing within the scene, the lack of reverse shot, contextualisation shot, or close-up. Much of the intensity and the horror comes from this uncut duration, which becomes something to endure, each moment is emphasised by the repetitive rhythms of his footsteps and his skull-crushing blows. The scene also foregrounds questions of witnessing: not only does the camera closely follow Sergey, a metre behind him on the stairs and on guard in the doorway while he kills, but my first instinct, despite having watched nearly two hours of sign language, was to be puzzled at the lack of reaction from the roommates, especially once the violence began. I was thus acutely aware of their inability to witness and therefore avoid the attacks, by virtue of their inability to hear. Moreover, the positioning of the camera behind Sergey's shoulders and

in the doorway during the murders, made it feel as though I was watching from the perspective of an accomplice.

In this sequence, we feel as though we are watching the events in 'real time', rather than a condensed, edited version of violence. Not only are we privy to these events taking place but also the process, the smaller stages which make up the entire event. In *The Tribe*, we perceive not simply murder, but the twelve separate blows which crush the boys' skulls, the dark spurts of blood, the bouncy limpness of their inert arms, the hard collision of the wood of the cabinets with bone. That this occurs in the context of extended takes, provokes a feeling of processive duration which makes palpable the passing of time, as each of Sergey's steps emphasises a horrific sense of rhythm. I felt an anticipatory, fearful, horror-film suspense and the beating of my own heart to further emphasised the metered passing of time. For *The Tribe*, thinking duration unitarily is achieved in describing the last scene as 'four murders': in this case, the victims are unalterably dead, the event is considered as a whole; the earlier stages (walking up the stairs, opening doors) are filtered through a knowledge of the later violence such that they become part of the murder even though at that stage, the boys are still alive. However, the scene emphasises small details about Sergey's footsteps, his breathing, the difficulty he has lifting the heavy cabinets, shown by his noises of effort, to which we are attuned given the absence of other sounds and the stasis of the camera once he is in the bedroom. The murders are not only shown in unitary duration (four murders), rather we see the elements which make up this murder, the process of life being taken and the potential, in the middle, that events could play out differently because they are still *becoming*. We are encouraged to attend to the particularities of each moment, to each moment as part of a larger process which we are (unfortunately) privy to; we are asked to perceive that particular moment's relation to all the other events around it. In *The Tribe* we are aware that a footstep comes after other footsteps, that a blow to the head

comes after the first strike but before the third strike. If we note such elements, we demonstrate an awareness of specific details, qualities of particular alterable moments. We engage closely with both the particular qualities of that moment in time and a scene's processive stages which make up its unitary whole. Let us look at how this processive duration is linked to authenticity and a provocative confrontation with the spectator by examining the long takes of *Irreversible*.

Authenticity – *Irreversible*

In *Irreversible*, the central rape scene is famously filmed in a single take from a camera which remains static for most of the attack. Douglas Keesey quotes an interview with the director, Gaspar Noé, about *Irreversible* to argue that the 'real time' aspect to the rape scene makes it especially difficult to watch: "Noé has explained this duration in terms of realism: 'I thought the time was realistic. […] I don't think there are many rapes that are less than 5 minutes'" (2010: 96). For Noé in this quotation, the fact that the scene lasts a length of time approximately faithful to his perceptions of the duration of a 'real' rape provides the scene's realism. It is authentic because there is no evidence of temporal manipulation in the scene; the length of the scene within the narrative is no different from the length of the scene that we watch. We can consider this in Keeling's terms as experiencing the same processes of duration as the characters. This is also a reformulation, in terms of duration instead of visibility, of the argument that the rape scene in *Baise-moi* is realistic because it makes penetration visible and thus shows the 'realities' of rape (see chapter 2). Just as *Baise-moi* does not obfuscate the penetrative aspects of rape, *Irreversible* does not obfuscate the length of a rape.

In the rape scene in *Irreversible*, the single (apparently) unedited take equates diegetic time and story time, evoking the realism that André Bazin associated with the seal hunting sequence in *Nanook of the North*:

> What matters to Flaherty, confronted with Nanook hunting the seal, is the relation between Nanook and the animal; the actual length of the waiting period. Montage could suggest the time involved. Flaherty however confines himself to showing the actual waiting period; the length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true object. (Bazin 2004: I: 27)

For Bazin, the length of this scene (four and a half minutes) is a realist depiction because time becomes the image's 'true object'. Not only do we gain access to the realism of the portrayed images, which he sees as inherent to the photographic image, given its method of mechanical reproduction, but in the long take we experience a temporal realism as well. This temporal realism allows a deeper, emotional engagement with the events on screen – Bazin subsequently contends the seal scene is "much more moving" (ibid.) – than is possible in montage's 'suggestion' of time. Reading *Irreversible*'s rape scene in this way, the length of the rape becomes "the very substance of the image" (ibid.). Although Bazin also focuses on a scene's spatial integrity (there are no close-ups – every shot shows Nanook's whole body *and* the ice hole), the scene is shot from several different positions: Bazin's remarks point to the *temporal* realism of the long take. This realism becomes more pronounced in single takes because there is no difference in story time and diegetic time. If the seal scene is more moving because of the long scene from stationary cameras, the rape scene in *Irreversible* is more intense because of its long take.

The evocation of the processive duration of a scene can however be reduced by distractions and changes in other aspects of the film. We concentrate so much on Nanook's attempts to hold onto the seal because for many minutes we can only see Nanook, a hole, a rope and an expanse of snow. We concentrate on his struggle, his repeated slips, the strength of the unseen seal. Comparably, the long take in *Irreversible* focuses us on Alex's screams, her struggle to escape and the violations she experiences because the camera does not move and the image barely changes. As Grønstad notes, "by evacuating all but the most infinitesimal action from the frame, by bracketing inaction, […] the extreme long take visualises […] the passing of time itself," (2016: 274). In the rape scenes in *Irreversible* and *Twentynine Palms* the camera remains static for long periods; in *Intimacy* and *Sombre*, scenes are frequently devoid of dialogue for long periods; in *9 Songs*, *Anatomy of Hell* and *The Brown Bunny* the character or characters remain alone for long periods; in most of the films, non-diegetic music is rare. As scenes continue, we yearn for a reverse-shot, extra-diegetic music, a new character or dialogue to give us respite from the images' intensity. Much has been written about the rape scene in *Irreversible*, its length and the static camera (Felperin 2003; Brinkema 2004; Downing 2006; von Brincken 2009; Keesey 2010) and so I examine *The Brown Bunny* to explore the links between processive duration and the ethical framework of new extreme films.

Grief – *The Brown Bunny*

The Brown Bunny, its original Cannes cut derided by critic Roger Ebert as "unendurably boring" (2004),[40] is one film where the length of scenes and the inactivity within them draws attention to their length and to the passing of time. *The Brown Bunny* follows a depressed Bud

[40] 26 minutes was cut from the Cannes version to create the 93-minute general-release cut. All my comments pertain to the final cut of the film.

Clay, a motorcycle racer, driving across America, reminiscing about his ex-girlfriend, Daisy, and having brief inconsequential encounters along the way. Its long average shot length and narrative sparsity bring it close to the phenomenon of slow cinema, described by Matthew Flanagan as including films which employ "(often extremely) long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday" (2008). One scene, when Bud visits Daisy's parents', exemplifies this style. A long take from behind Bud's head shows him driving around streets looking for the house; he stops, gets out and in a static take from the opposite side of the road we see him explain who he is and go into the house. Inside, Bud exchanges a few comments with the elderly couple (the father remains silent throughout) – 'your daughter liked swimming', 'I used to play in the back yard' – and it becomes clear that the couple have no memory of Bud. Without any significant dialogue, Bud announces 'I have to get going now,' and leaves. From the start of his search in the car to leaving the house, this scene is nearly eight minutes long with only eight shots, two of which exceed two minutes in length.

De Luca and Barradas Jorge argue that in the disjunction created by the combination of extended shot duration and an apparent lack of audiovisual content, slow cinema "makes time noticeable in the image and consequently felt by the viewer" (2016: 5) and that "slow time is made manifest and felt in those instances in which one is confronted with the impossibility of shaping temporal rhythms according to one's will" (2016: 4). Similarly, *The Brown Bunny* makes time palpable, its passing noticeable. Nonetheless, the film's final scene, a tortured masturbatory reminiscence about Daisy's death, includes significant narrative developments and a focus on rape and visible sex acts, which bring it into a discussion of extremity. As in *Twentynine Palms*, the denouement comes as a surprise, but the preceding eventlessness cannot be understood without reference to this final scene.

Beginning half an hour before the end credits, the final scene occupies nearly a third of *The Brown Bunny*'s running time, contains most of the film's dialogue and takes place almost entirely in a motel room. Daisy appears, smokes crack cocaine, engages in prolonged discussion with Bud about their relationship. They kiss, lie on the bed and Bud forcefully encourages Daisy to perform fellatio during which they continue to talk. Towards the end of the scene, we discover that Daisy was gang-raped at a party while unconscious (witnessed by Bud, who assumed she was cheating on him) and subsequently choked to death on her own vomit. Daisy's presence in this final scene is therefore imagined and part of Bud's process of dealing with guilt and grief. The fact that Daisy is dead comes as a surprise to the viewer and thus the whole scene plays out as diegetically real rather than solely in Bud's imagination. The scene is slow with an average shot length of 17 seconds until the (more quickly edited) flashbacks are shown, emphasising the slow narrative progress towards sex. With the claustrophobia of the room, we are placed in emotional proximity to the pair, emphasised by the close-up camerawork which dominates once they start kissing, and the quiet muffled sound which makes it difficult to hear parts of the conversation, especially when Daisy has Bud's penis in her mouth.

The Brown Bunny can be linked to extremity and other new extreme films in several ways. We experience the authenticity of modal ambiguities through the visibility of Bud's erect penis. Some viewers may know that, like in *Irreversible*, the main actors were a couple at the time of the filming – in *Irreversible*, Vincent Cassel and Monica Bellucci; in *The Brown Bunny*, Vincent Gallo and Chloë Sevigny – which adds authenticity to the sex. The aesthetic is comparable to the home-video or documentary aesthetic seen in *Baise-moi*, *A Hole in my Heart* and *The Idiots*, with a grainy image texture, many blurred shots and handheld-camera movements. In terms of the inside/outside aspects of extremity, although we can see Bud's/Gallo's erect penis, the penis is seen relatively little despite how close the camera is to the fellatio: often cupped

by his hand *and* Daisy's mouth, ejaculation is not seen (inside Daisy's mouth) and Bud, suddenly coy or ashamed, puts his penis quickly back in his trousers, pushing Daisy away. Moreover, although the fellatio lasts nearly three minutes, this is less than 10% of the sequence which consists predominantly of discussion and clothed kissing. For the entire scene, we are close to the two characters, and the many long takes communicate the progression of their discussion, of their lover's tiff, of the increased eroticism, and of their changing attitude towards each other. The fellatio also emphasises process, with a close-up of Bud's crotch beginning 90 seconds before he removes his penis from his underwear: we see him remove Daisy's bra and touch her nipples, we see Daisy kissing Bud's trousers and massaging his penis through the material, and close-ups of Bud looking down as Daisy does all this. We are encouraged to see each developmental stage in the scene as a whole.

Given that this is an emanation of Bud's imagination, and his way of grieving for his dead girlfriend, we are drawn close into the processive development of his grief and anxiety. We can never share his discomfort, guilt and sadness but we think about it for nearly half an hour as little else happens. We share Bud's temporal experience of the scene and are confronted with the erotics of his grief, with some of his pain, the feeling of it rather than explanatory, psychologised frameworks. It is difficult to distance ourselves from the diegetic events. The evocation of processive duration in *The Brown Bunny*, in the context of an erotic scene of fellatio and flashbacks to gang-rape and manslaughter, affectively communicates some of the pain of grief using our shared experience of the scene's duration to encourage us to reflect on others' grief, without suggesting that we can know them. That we cannot 'know' the other is signalled at the end when we realise that Daisy is dead, and that the scene we have just found so moving, authentic and confrontational, was a figment of Bud's imagination.[41]

[41] A comparable argument pertains to the murder sequence in *I Stand Alone*, which is also affectively confrontational and is revealed only afterwards to have been fictional.

Nonetheless, the spectator's affective engagement in Bud's grief is problematic. Bud's behaviour towards Daisy is coercive and manipulative, as he convinces her to bare herself outside the covers and perform fellatio when she is reticent to do so. Bud's coercive sexual treatment of Daisy is especially troubling after the revelation that Bud witnessed her rape but did nothing to intervene. Bud pushes Daisy to take off her shirt; she asks to get under the covers but he ignores her and he engages in more aggressive bite-like kissing; when she consents to sex on top of the covers, he pulls her head towards his crotch as he undoes his belt; during the fellatio he berates her about previous sexual experiences and after he has ejaculated, he pushes her away, calling her a whore. Although this adds once again to the number of images of coercive sexual acts at the expense of women, it is a fantasy and in one sense, dream and fantasy scenarios pose different ethical questions. As Jenny Bivona and Joseph Critelli (2008, 2009) observe, coercive sexual fantasies are common in women but this must not be understood as showing that women, want to be raped or sexually assaulted: fantasy is complex and cannot be reduced to any simple meaning. However, as I argued in chapter 2 in response to Hainge's (2007) comments that morality should be disregarded in Grandrieux's films, the images in these films are images in the world and therefore must be assessed according to the ethical criteria used to assess any image. This scene is therefore troubling in that it is yet another instance of a male director using coercive sex with a woman in an arthouse film to explore male identity and experience. As Dominique Russell critiques, sexual violence in arthouse films is frequently disentangled from the complexities of rape, seduction and power and "subordinated to political or philosophical purposes", "reinforc[ing] the hierarchy of masculine imagination over feminine body" (2010: 6). The specificities of Daisy's real-life and fantasy assaults are subsumed into a narrative of male existential crisis.

Furthermore in the context of grief and trauma, *The Brown Bunny*'s inculcation of the viewer into the processes of Bud's grief is problematic. In re-enacting the traumatic event (rape and manslaughter) from the perspective of an accomplice (Bud saw the rape and did not intervene), *The Brown Bunny* repeats a troubling aspect of Cathy Caruth's conception of the voice in her Freudian reading of trauma. Following Freud, Caruth (1996) argues that a traumatic event is not actually experienced originally, rather, being too overwhelming for the conscious mind, it is repressed into the unconscious. A second event triggers the person to remember the original event and thus experience it *for the first time*. She illustrates this with Freud's retelling of a story from Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered [Gerusalemme liberata]* (2014 [1581]) in which Tancred kills his beloved Clorinda while she is on the battlefield in disguise. Her soul flees to a tree and later, when Tancred angrily lashes out with his sword at this tree, Clorinda's voice floats out and Tancred experiences the trauma of her death through that voice. The central problem with this example is that Clorinda is the victim, the one who suffered the traumatic event, and yet her murderer (albeit her lover) is the one working through his trauma *by wounding her again*. This opens up troubling questions about the trauma of perpetrators and suggests that further violence is an answer to past violence.

In *The Brown Bunny*, the durational qualities of this final scene involve us in a complex web of sexualised violence that ultimately condones the use of coercive sexual fantasies as a means for dealing with the trauma of *witnessing and perpetrating* a crime. While I have no wish to criminalise the imagination, the suggestion that Bud may find redemption from his abdication of responsibility through violent sexual fantasies positions *him, the witness,* as the victim of *her* rape and death, just as Tancred is the one working through the trauma by wounding *Clorinda* a second time. Bud, like Tancred, was complicit in her attack because he assumed she was cheating on him and thus chose not to curtail her violation. By using rape and murder

as methods by which perpetrators or accomplices work through their own trauma at the initial rape or murder, the traumatic experience of the victim is elided. The powerful way in which *The Brown Bunny* asks us to (re)consider ideas of grief and loss is undercut by the elision of the female *victim's* experience in favour of the male *witness's* exposure to the traumatic event. As I will explore in following sections of this chapter, certain scholars see this as an inherent problem in depictions of rape but first let me point to a similar diegetic valorisation of a male perpetrator in *Free Will*.

Rape – *Free Will*

The opening of *Free Will* depicts a rape in lengthy and close-up detail. At this point in the film, we have no idea about the characters or their backgrounds, knowing only, as a result of the first scene depicting Theo at work in a kitchen that he is likely the protagonist and is quick to anger. A succession of quick shots, shows Theo (currently unnamed) in a car stalking a female cyclist, often following Theo's line of sight. He becomes increasingly agitated as he accelerates past the cyclist, round a bend and stops out of sight. We sit in the car with the man for 40 seconds (two shots of 33 and 7 seconds) as he grabs bandages from a medical kit and then waits nervously before jumping out as the cyclist passes. A pan follows him out the car as he grabs the cyclist by the head and sits on top of her before dragging her over a nearby bank into some scrubland. At the top of a small mound, a 97-second shot shows her falling down the other side, where he jumps on her, forces her to quieten down and removes her jacket before tying her hands with a bandage. A 60-second close-up now focuses on him from her perspective as he removes her trousers; the camera tilts down to show him grabbing her breasts and genitals before masturbating through his trousers. Then we see a close-up of her bloodied face, breasts in shot, quivering with fear. In a 70-second shot, he continues to masturbate before blindfolding

her with another bandage. He pushes her legs up, leaning over her, and masturbates vigorously; the camera watches from roughly her position before moving backwards and being set down on the ground, static, about a metre away from her. He leans over her shouting 'cunt, cunt' and punches her in the face, the shock of which is emphasised by a close-up on her face and subsequent punches, shot from roughly his position. In a 68-second shot, we move back to her perspective looking at him as punches rain down, he moves back, spits on his hand and penetrates her, thrusting vigorously. He suddenly gets up, pulls his trousers up and wanders a short distance away without turning back, at which point she escapes. The attack itself, between him jumping out of the car and her escape, lasts around eight minutes while the sequence as a whole, including the car drive and the subsequent police chase for Theo, we endure for fourteen. All this while, we have no idea who the characters are, and almost no contextualising information.

This long brutal sequence, within a film described as "relentlessly intense" (Fouz-Hernández 2009: 33), confronts us with long takes and close-ups of uncontextualised violence from the start of the film. Over half of the attack is shown in just four shots (of 97, 60, 70 and 68 seconds), which include close-ups of the victim's face and body. We remain tense for the entire scene, a tension which continues for the whole film because we discover that this is not his first offence: it is not an aberration but rather, all women are potentially at risk from his attacks even if prison has possibly rehabilitated him. Moreover, the process of the attacks is emphasised in the long takes and in the details of the mechanisms of his assault. He hides his car, he prepares his materials, he ties the woman up, he removes her clothes, he masturbates to gain an erection, there is an aftermath of her escape and his pursuit. Each element, each developmental stage is shown, such as when he winds the bandages round her wrists and eyes, or when he wanders agitatedly around, struggling with his flaccid penis. Like the footsteps in *The Tribe*, we also perceive the beating rhythm of Theo's violative thrusts, creating a metronomic effect which

emphasise the duration of the attacks, and how the attack is made up of numerous physical violations of the woman's vagina. The length of the scene and of the shots within this long scene highlight the stages of violence in rape and demand that we experience a hint of the duration. This is about emphasising the processive duration, the process of rape, and preventing the spectator from reducing it to its unitary duration. This is not just a contextualising sequence to explain that our protagonist is a rapist but rather, in its aggressive confrontation of the spectator with the process of the rape, it is a depiction of the horror and violence of the man's acts.

However, like in *The Brown Bunny*, we follow the male protagonist, here the perpetrator and not just the accomplice/witness. Most of the film takes place after Theo is released from prison, after serving nine years for several rapes, and chronicles his attempts to lead a 'normal' life and overcome his desire to rape. As the film's title suggests, Theo struggles to work out how much free will he has in his rapist desires, eventually committing suicide when he realises he cannot control his urges, demonstrating that he has always had free will in some way. However, in portraying Theo as traumatised by his own actions, much of the film focuses on the lasting trauma of a perpetrator. This becomes most explicit in a comparison of a second rape scene late in the film with the opening one described above. In the case of the second rape, although there is a static 50-second shot of the violation, the attack itself lasts only 89 seconds and the violence is mainly hidden from view behind a car. After the rape, three shots lasting altogether 97 seconds detail the difficulty Theo has leaving the fob-controlled underground garage where the rape takes place, emphasising his fear of getting caught rather than the comatose woman lying half-naked on the floor. Furthermore, his exit from the garage cuts immediately to an 86-second shot of him crying in his bathroom after having washed incriminating evidence off his visible penis. He sits on the bathroom floor, sobbing into his hands, seemingly traumatised by

his own character, his own actions, and by the realisation that he will have to leave his girlfriend, whom he has only just found, in order to protect her from himself. Thus while the second rape is disturbing to watch, it is overshadowed, both in its brevity and in the much longer takes of shots after it, by the practical and psychological concerns of the rapist. Where the visibility of the penis in the rape scenes in *Baise-moi* and *Irreversible* emphasises the penile violation, obscured in most rape scenes, here the visible penis emphasises the rapist's need to hide evidence, even if the presence of blood highlights the violence of the rape. The brutal material aspects of this rape, the experience of the woman within it, are overshadowed by the perpetrator's anxieties. While the first rape emphasises rape itself, its processive, material, corporeal aspects, the second rape becomes metaphorical, a means by which to explore Theo's existential crisis and his increasing anxiety. We are therefore encouraged, through the second rape, to consider male perpetrator anxiety rather than female victim experience.

Scholars also repeat this problematic superiority of male thought over female bodies when reading *Free Will* not as a film about rape, but about contemporary German (male) cultural anxieties. Fouz-Hernández, for instance, reads *Free Will* as representing a "symbolically schizophrenic" German masculinity and Theo as demonstrating the "split male body [which] mirrors the national German body" (2009: 33–34). For Fouz-Hernandez the rapes are only interesting inasmuch as they act as metaphors for theorising German male identity, a view of which Hawkins would rightly be sceptical, when she asks about *Last Tango in Paris* (Bertolucci, 1972), "who determines when anal rape is a metaphor and when it is not?" (2000: 196). Where the first rape challenges us to ask ourselves why we continue to watch such violence and to perceive rape as about power rather than sex, the second rape's physical elements are lost as they become metaphorical ammunition for Theo's battle between free will and bodily desire. Given that *The Brown Bunny*'s coercive fellatio scene is entirely imagined, we can also see it as a

metaphor for the grief process, rather than as an engagement with the material aspects of rape and death. In both *The Brown Bunny* and *Free Will*, despite durational, material physicality communicating the violence of grief and the suffering of rape victims, by the end of the film, such suffering is subsumed within the narrative of male perpetrators' attempts to come to terms with the suffering of their female victims. In this way the progressive altering of our interpretation of images of sex and violence, achieved through evocations of processive duration, is undermined by the narrative framing of such events, and their cinematographic comparison with other violent scenes within the same film. These two films cannot simply be recuperated into a redemptive narrative, productively emphasising the material aspects of sex and/or violence to make us rethink how we view those events and their images.

Free Will and *The Brown Bunny* fit into the ethical framework of new extreme films because they use affective, confrontational images to encourage us to rethink how we look at images of rape and grief, respectively. They are relevant to this chapter because our inculcation into these scenes and their confrontational nature is predominantly achieved through the evocation of processive duration, although the visibility of an erect penis in *The Brown Bunny* and the proximity through close-ups also contribute to their provocative impact. Nonetheless they display retrogressive political viewpoints which counter their ostensibly progressive politics.

Ethical witnessing

In *The Brown Bunny*, the fact that Bud witnesses Daisy's rape is integral to understanding his grief and guilt. In *Free Will* the trauma of Theo's second rape is his trauma as a witness of his own horrific actions. Witnessing is a concern of other new extreme films such as *Fat Girl*, *Twentynine Palms*, *Romance* and *Irreversible* and is often linked to long takes and long scenes.

In an argument which links duration, spectatorship and ethics, Roy Brand argues that the duration of long takes changes how we should think about the act of witnessing. Our exposure to processive duration in the long take becomes the means by which witnessing takes place, a witnessing that is ethical rather than ontological. Brand thinks of the film spectator as an ethical witness, detaching from the conventional meaning of witness, the necessity of having been present physically at the moment of the event. Examining the long takes of *Elephant*, Brand argues that time in the film is experienced "as duration rather than as a sequence of fragmented happenings" (2009: 208). This foreshadows my argument about processive duration becoming palpable in the long take; here we become aware of time's passing, of how long the scene is. For Brand, this awareness of duration is intrinsically related to witnessing because "engaging the passage of time is a paradigmatic characteristic of the witness" (ibid.).

I have suggested in my analysis of *The Brown Bunny* and *Free Will* that we are exposed to the processive duration of an event in the long take and that, in the case of violent acts, this is confrontational and disturbing. Brand argues that this engagement with the temporality of the assault carries ethical weight because it is a key role undertaken by the witness. He contends that:

> for many, this engagement means being there at the time and the place of the event. But I would like to claim that it can also mean that the witness is privy to the temporality of the event or to its unfolding in time. The witness is 'there' at the time of the event, though 'being there' does not necessarily mean being at the same place at the same time. (Brand 2009: 208)

The experience of the characters' duration, their processive duration in Keeling's terms, is the most important part of the relation between spectator and screen for Brand. This means that

certain types of images can evoke an ethical engagement conventionally linked to having been present during an act. The fact of being physically present is less important than how you look, how you respond, how you (re)think, when viewing the event unfolding on screen:

> Being present is not to be taken ontologically (as *being* there) but ethically – as being responsible or at least responsive to the event. […] Obviously we cannot change the past or determine the future, though we can still see ourselves as answering to their demands. Likewise, we cannot change what we view on screen, but we can see ourselves implicated in some important ways. (ibid.: 209)

Ethical witnessing is not a replacement for ontological witnessing but if we follow Brand in seeing the witness's *response* to the event as central to the experience of being a witness, long takes and long scenes can be understood as evoking ethical witnessing if they encourage us to reflect on our complicity in, and responsibility for, the events we have witnessed. We are clearly not responsible for the immediate act of violence but we can think about our societal responsibility for the conditions that lead to such events.

Brand's idea that the spectator 'cannot change the past' but can answer its demands ex post facto echoes Silverman's idea of retroactive revision. Silverman argues that "although we cannot control what happens to a perception before we become aware of it, we can retroactively revise the value which it assumes for us at a conscious level" (1996: 3). In both Brand's and Silverman's accounts, it is not the first view which counts – not our first, visceral, reaction to the images –, but rather how we reflect on that first reaction, finding ourselves 'implicated' (Brand) or 'retroactively revising' (Silverman). The evocation of witnessing in long takes and long scenes is part of the same ethical framework of new extreme films. Through our affective inculcation in the duration of a scene, we are encouraged to reconsider the meaning we attach

to certain images. In the case of new extreme films, this is images of sex and especially violence. For Brand, this means that *Elephant* is not just a film about killing or killers, but a film which asks us to consider how we view killers and how society treats them: "*Elephant* is not only about why others kill but also what *we* do when others kill, to where and why we turn our eyes, and what kind of explanations we wish for and produce" (2009: 211). Analysing the films thus, we can draw a clear link between the film's engagement with the processive duration of diegetic events – communicated especially by the long take – and the ethical demand that we rethink how we look at particular acts. The experience of processive duration makes us aware of our responsibility for our own acts of looking, regardless of the fact that we were never present at the original events. Let us look at *Fat Girl* to see how a new extreme film evokes ethical witnessing and asks us to rethink societal understandings of seduction, heterosexual coupling and romance.

Witnessing, seduction and rape – *Fat Girl*

Fat Girl tells the story of two sisters, Elena (15) and Anaïs (12), holidaying with their parents. They have different ideas about love, with Elena believing in true love and determined to lose her virginity romantically and Anaïs more cynical, preferring the first time to be with someone for whom she feels nothing. The long takes and long scenes of *Fat Girl* evoke an ethical witnessing and encourage the spectator to consider societal understandings of seduction and rape. Just eighteen minutes into the film begins the long pivotal scene, when Fernando, Elena's holiday boyfriend, sneaks into the sisters' shared bedroom and engages in increasingly manipulative attempts to have sex with Elena, while Anaïs pretends to sleep in the bed opposite. Anaïs's perspective as witness is integrated into our viewing experience despite most of the screen time being focused on Elena and Fernando. After Elena removes her bra, the camera, situated at the

foot of the bed, slowly tracks round the bed, rising such that Anaïs, apparently asleep, becomes visible in the far corner of the room. The camera then returns towards the foot of the bed, zooming in slightly, thereby moving Anaïs beyond the frame and focussing on the couple. This long take emphasises the presence of the witness, without disrupting the processive aspects of Fernando's attempts at seduction.

After several shots of the couple, bridged with their continuing discussions, we cut to a shot looking directly at Anaïs's face as she covers her eyes as if to emphasise that both she and we are watching (but do not want to). A reverse-shot shows Elena naked from the waist down and Fernando, erection visible, climbing on top of her. A five-minute single take, then documents Elena's discomfort as Fernando convinces her to have anal sex because it 'doesn't count'. On penetration, we cut back to Anaïs's face as the soundtrack fills with Elena's discomfort, a scream of pain, calls to stop, and Fernando's groans of pleasure. The couple embraces and Fernando reassures Elena that this barely consensual anal violation was a 'proof of love'. The explicitness and soundtrack are repeated the next night, except this time it is consensual vaginal sex and our viewing position is on the other side of Anaïs's bed: in the foreground, Anaïs is turned away from the couple, weeping; in the background the couple's legs move back and forth for nearly a minute until Fernando orgasms and the scene ends. In the long scene and many long takes, we engage with the passage of time of these events. Fernando's seduction/violation is deeply uncomfortable because we see the process by which he manipulates and coerces her into feeling guilty and unworthy as well as seeing the duration of the acts as experienced by Anaïs.

The long scene engages not only with the events as a unitary duration of 'sexual coercion' but with the stage-by-stage development of that coercion: of Elena's attempts to fight back, of the

cultural pressures that Fernando utilises to convince her to agree, of the little skirmishes across face, lips, breasts, anus, vagina. Even once she reluctantly acquiesces, we see her bare white body, unmoving like a sacrificial lamb as Fernando leers over her, penis held out to spear her virginal flesh. We cannot forget the physicality of this encounter, emphasised by the anguished noises Elena makes when this phallic weapon cleaves her thighs. The fact of the painful entrance of penis in anus, and not just the abstract idea of a loss of virginity, is emphasised. This violation is material, physical, not metaphorical. Moreover, we are reminded repeatedly, that this is witnessed: we see Anaïs in the background at the beginning; covering her face during the anal sex; she shouts at them in the morning 'I want to sleep!' reminding the couple (and us) that they are not alone; and we see Anaïs weeping during the second night's sex. Although, we occupy different viewing positions to Anaïs, indeed we often look at her rather than from her position, the fact of her witnessing, reminds us that we too are witnessing the events.

To paraphrase Brand, while Anaïs is there at the same time and place of the event, we are 'there' at the time of the event in that we engage with its temporality and in its processive duration. Seeing Anaïs ontologically witnessing emphasises our position as ethical witness, as needing to be responsible and responsive to the event (ibid.: 209). By conceiving of ourselves and Anaïs as co-witnesses to the event, a broader social reading takes on its full force. As well as Elena's violation, we witness the violative mechanisms that underlie cultural understandings of 'seduction', or alternatively, as Horeck puts it, "in seeing Anaïs's shame, we, too, feel ashamed" (2010: 205). We are encouraged to feel ashamed at cultural conventions which legitimise Fernando's despicable coercive tactics. Importantly, such a reading is not metaphorical in the sense that the sex comes to symbolise something else (loss of innocence, purity, etc.); even if the spectator is asked to consider the discourses surrounding our understanding of rape and seduction, the material, physical nature of the act remains at the forefront of our minds. As

Horeck concludes, referring to the film's unsettling finale when Anaïs appears to consent to rape by a murderous stranger: "what we are left with, instead, is an unsettling and ambiguous replay of the scene of sexual initiation, one in which the boundaries separating rape from heterosexual intercourse, violence from love, are disturbingly unclear" (2010: 208–9). Our sense of having witnessed Elena's violation, and by metonymy, of witnessing problematic cultural understandings of seduction, encourages us to look again at how we understand rape, consent, violence and romance. While we might have felt these issues are clear, we are asked to view them from an alternative position. Not only are we encouraged to see the disturbingly fluid boundaries between romantic seduction and coercive sexual acts, but we are asked to see the violence present at the heart of heterosexual coupling. Rather than violence being the pathologised other of sex, violence in *Fat Girl* is at the heart of conventionally positive ideas such as romance and seduction. *Fat Girl* is not just about *why* individuals rape, seduce or sexually assault but how *we* react to such acts, the explanations we find for such actions and the discourses which surround interpretations of the acts. The processive duration of extreme acts becomes a confrontational means of encouraging the spectator to rethink interpretations of common concepts.

There are however problematic aspects to the depiction of rape in *Fat Girl*, especially the final sequence in which Anaïs is raped. After Anaïs is thrown to the ground, two medium-close-up long takes of 51 and 42 seconds show her top being pulled up revealing her breasts, her underpants being stuffed into her mouth and the man lying on top to penetrate her. After a moment, Anaïs wraps her arms around the man's shoulders in an embrace. When the rapist has finished, Anaïs and the rapist share a moment, staring into each other's eyes as Anaïs removes her pants from her mouth and the rapist appears to stroke her hair before she unemotionally covers her chest up again. When the police arrive, she denies being raped: "don't believe me if you don't

want to". This scene has been read in many ways: Krisjansen and Maddock, using Bataille's concept of sovereignty, suggest this scene demonstrates the possibilities of sex outside the bourgeois utilities of romantic liaisons like Elena's (2003), while Williams reads it as an unsettling suggestion that a quick rape is better than a prolonged romance (2001). Most compellingly, Horeck, bringing *Fat Girl* together with the sexual violence in *Romance* and *Baise-moi*, argues that Anaïs's denial does not suggest "that a rape did not happen, but that the girl refuses to have the idea of a fragile femininity, indelibly damaged by the physical violence of rape, foisted upon her by dominant male society" (2010: 208); her denial functions as an "attempt[] to assert woman's control over her own sexuality and body" (ibid.: 198). These interpretations suggest that *Fat Girl* encourages us to change how we look at, and conceive of, rape, sex, seduction and romance: none of these commentators deny that Anaïs was raped by the stranger, but rather they contend that it is *our* underlying assumptions about rape and sex that are being discussed. These commentators thus draw similar conclusions to the one I suggested above with *Fat Girl* being seen as a comment on discourses of violence within sex and rape.

Nonetheless, these commentators sidestep the suggestion of there being anything problematic about depictions of a child seemingly consenting to rape and then denying any rape took place, despite the fact that such behaviour is common in cases of child sexual abuse (Pipe and others 2007). This is especially surprising in a British context because the BBFC chose to censor much of this final scene for repeating common narratives of denial in child-sex-abuse cases, suggesting the scene could be exploited by paedophiles as an example to children of how to submit to rape (Keesey 2010: 101). We must be careful in reclaiming the entire film as a liberating feminist reconceptualization of rape and/or romance because this involves a denial of the final sequence's problematic nature in relation to real-life child sexual abuse. I am therefore in agreement with Keesey when he criticizes exactly this blind spot in some scholarship: "my aim

here is not to defend the grounds for censorship, but I do want to point out that there are certain problematic aspects of this particular representation […] that should not be ignored or 'interpreted away' in an effort to save Breillat for political correctness" (ibid.). As with many of the films discussed in this chapter, *Fat Girl* remains problematic and uncomfortable despite putting forward an ostensibly progressive critique of the violence of heterosexual mating rituals. We should not ignore these problematic political issues in new extreme films but understand them as part of the problematic way they operate. I now turn to *Twentynine Palms* which also contains long takes, long scenes and a diegetic witness during the film's climactic rape scene.

Male rape – *Twentynine Palms*

Twentynine Palms follows David and Katia as they wander in their car around the Californian desert. Katia is Russian, David, American, and they communicate in rudimentary French while engaging in angry sex and arguments. Towards the end of the film, three men force their Hummer off the road and drag them from the car. Katia is stripped, while David is beaten in the face with a baseball bat before being raped. The other attackers look on and force Katia to watch before driving away. From the point at which the couple's car is rammed from behind on the empty road, the rape sequence constantly emphasises the duration of the actions depicted. As the Hummer is being pushed, David shouts, his screams so long he has to take a breath to continue. As the cars come to a halt, the action does not immediately progress: there are a few seconds of suspense, during which nothing happens, before the attackers jump out of the car. During the rape, a rhythm is created through the rapist's grunts and David's bloodied head rocking back and forth against the sand, a rhythm which continues throughout the four shots during the rape (medium-long shot, close-up on Katia, close-up on David, close-up on rapist). As the attackers drive off, we are left with a static 105-second long shot of Katia and David

lying prone in the sand. Before, during and after the attack, the passing of time is emphasised and the moment-by-moment development of the attack highlighted: the processive duration of the event is evoked. Rather than the unalterable 'unitary' fact of the rape and its witnessing, we are exposed to the rape "as it is lived through in time" by David (see Keeling 1991: 6).

As with other long takes and long scenes discussed here, there is little to distract us from the physicality of the rape and the beating David receives, both of which Katia is powerless to prevent. The rapists are strangers, their motivation entirely unknown, the long take at the end is static for the whole shot, there are no sounds other than the characters' screams and groans, and the film ends very soon afterwards with David murdering Katia before committing suicide. Not only are the characters' motivations obscure but it is hard to see what socio-political meaning we can draw from this surprising and unexplained entrance of sexualised violence into the narrative. Lübecker argues that the film's affective, political and metaphysical impact all strain against each other. Too much time is spent confined in the car or in motel rooms, with the spectator affectively confronted with the aggressive physicality of the couple's sex, to form a clear political critique. This material aspect also competes for space with the metaphysical, existential elements evoked by the couple's encounters with the desert spaces. Both the physical and metaphysical are found within the context of a potential critique of American militarism (the Hummer was originally an army vehicle and Lübecker suggests the rapists are US marines (2015: 116)) and yet such a specific political subject is never elucidated. Lübecker therefore suggests that "instead of being a rich and multi-layered film, *Twentynine Palms* is a raw and edgy one. Instead of watching a work in which the three strands [political, physical, metaphysical] organically combine, we experience an implosion of meaning" (ibid.: 117-18). While there is significant potential meaning available, there is no clear way to understand the film's provocative and affectively challenging images.

In refusing to give clear meaning to the violence and yet still making us experience this processive duration of the attack, the film turns questions back onto the spectator: what was so unpleasant? why did I keep watching? why did I sit through the film to be assaulted like that? Furthermore, the idea that we are challenged about our own spectatorship is emphasised by many other elements in this scene. It is especially notable, apart from its difficult-to-view violence, that Katia is forced to watch David being raped. Like in *Fat Girl*, this scene emphasises not only the violation but the act of watching the violation. However, while in *Fat Girl*, this ethical witnessing through the shared duration of the event was able to draw attention to how society interprets seduction, romance and rape, Lisa Coulthard points out a disquieting aspect of witnessing in *Twentynine Palms*. Coulthard contends that the presence of a forced witness in the male rape scenes in both *Deliverance* (Boorman, 1972) and *Twentynine Palms* demonstrates how male rape victims are presented differently to female victims. Citing Carol Clover, Coulthard argues that the films present the witness as a victim over and above the rape victim themselves: "the focus is on the shame of the witnessing itself" (2010: 175) because while female-rape films "study the victims' faces at length and in close-up during the act; [*Deliverance*] looks at the act intermittently and in long shot, focussing less on the actual victim than on the victim's friend who must look on" (Clover 1987: 226n54). In *Twentynine Palms,* Coulthard argues, this same focus on the trauma of witnessing rather than the trauma of being raped is also in play:

> The emphasis is on Katia's traumatization in witnessing, more than on David's experience as a victim of rape, and I would argue that the scene allies the audience not only with her intensely affective reaction but with a concern for her welfare – that is, we worry that she will be next. (Coulthard 2010: 180)

While the processive duration of the long, slow post-rape shot can be seen, like the long takes in slow cinema as "a vehicle for introspection, reflection and thinking," (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016: 16), such reflection may be directed at the shame of witnessing and concern for the witness, rather than the trauma of being attacked. Like in *The Brown Bunny* and *Free Will*, the victim's suffering becomes elided by the suffering of others present during the assault. *Twentynine Palms* does inculcate us into the physicality and materiality of violence (and, in other scenes, sex) with long takes and long scenes to provoke us into seeing the physical, material aspects of sex and violence. It does, however, propagate problematic politics about the shame of witnessing male rape which elides the suffering and trauma of the rape victim.

Witnessing rape – problems

For certain scholars, problems such as those elucidated in relation to *Twentynine Palms* are not just relevant to specific instances of rape but to *all* depictions of rape. While Alison Young acknowledges that there can be cinematographic ways of bringing a progressive ethical outlook to depictions of rape (protracted duration, distorted camerawork, dark lighting, rapid editing, repetitive music) because they help to convey "the message that rape is a serious crime, with terrible effects on the victim" (2009: 71), she sees this as being fundamentally undermined by the fact of visualising the attacks. Young argues that the visual revealing of the witness's view of the rape allows justice "to arise from the forensic capacities of the spectator's relation to the crime-image" (ibid.: 56). Referring to *The Accused* (Kaplan, 1988), when the defendants are only convicted after the male witness's testimony, Young argues that those forensic capacities are necessary in the authentication of the rape, which, by logical extension, the woman herself cannot confirm by testimony alone:

> films such as *The Accused* do worse than take insufficient care in their representation of the event – they perpetuate the notion that rape must be seen before it can be condemned. In this notion resides the assumption that a woman's words, and a woman's memories of sexual injury, cannot be trusted or taken for granted: both the spectator and the law are alike in requiring corroboration of her claim. (Young 2009: 70)

For Young, all depictions of rape suffer from this legalistic desire for proof which rejects a woman's testimony as insufficient for conviction and implicitly doubts the veracity of any allegation of rape.[42] Being as a woman cannot attest to her own rape, a witness who can corroborate her story therefore has huge power in 'proving' that the rape took place. In *The Accused*, visual evidence of the rape is only shown to the spectator when the (male) witness corroborates the victim's story, as though it is only at this moment that the rape can actually be said to have happened.

Young also shows that, despite being provided with great power in authenticating the act of rape, the diegetic witness is nonetheless expurgated of responsibility by *the spectator's* inability to act. Identifying with a witness who *does* not act to help, allows the film viewer, who is *unable* to help, to condone the witness's passivity. Young refers to a scene in *Blackrock* (Vidler, 1997) where a girl is raped by the protagonist's friend and we watch the protagonist observing the rape and not acting. During the rape, the victim appears to reach out towards the witness for help, a movement recorded from a position somewhere near the witness:

> The alignment that is thus created between the spectator and Jared [the witness] immediately provides a sense of explicability for his failure to act – as Tracy [the victim] appeals to 'us', we know that 'we' cannot do anything to help her. Since we share our

[42] False allegations of rape are rare and many false accusors are almost certainly victims of some abuse if not the one reported (see Levitt 2013). Statistically at least, with 5 651 prosecutions in the UK for rape in the report's focus period, and only 38 for false accusations (a ratio of 148:1), allegations should be believed on principle.

> viewing position with Jared, this metonymically excuses his immobility in the face of what he sees. (Young 2009: 61)

The diegetic witness's lack of action (*Fat Girl, The Brown Bunny, Twentynine Palms, Irreversible*) and the evocation of an inevitably inactive spectatorial witness (*Free Will, The Tribe, A New Life, A Serbian Film*) is a marked characteristic of rape scenes in new extreme films. While we may be encouraged to consider ourselves as spectators, to ask ourselves why we watch, why we continue to watch, what pleasure we gain, there is nonetheless a fundamental exculpation of the spectator from responsibility for the act. As Kathleen Scott notes about *Irreversible*, a 'phallocentric gaze' argument suggests that "like the witness who sees and runs away, spectators would have the luxury of placing themselves at a physical remove from the violence occurring onscreen, secure in the knowledge that they are unable to intervene" (2014: 80–81). Along these lines, we may engage with the processive duration of a rape, we may become uncomfortably proximate to the bodies of attackers and victims, we may become an ethical witness to the attack, but these are all undercut by the simple fact that we watch the rape at all. As Young points out, "looking is never 'just looking' […] a looking that is interested only in the possibilities of justice in the aftermath of injury" (2009: 70). Even if we are encouraged to rethink interpretations of rape through techniques such as duration, as I contend we are in *Irreversible*, *Twentynine Palms*, *Fat Girl* and *Free Will*, we cannot escape the linking of the spectator's inability to act with diegetic witnesses' choice not to act. Nor can we deny the power of confirmation, which the visualising of rape removes from the victim, and gives to the witness and spectator.

We might however suggest that Young's critique is sometimes integrated into new extreme films' depictions of rape. Young suggests that rape images are both repellent *and* alluring (2009: 71) and indeed *Irreversible* seems to emphasise the fact that ethical concerns are never

our sole interest in watching images of rape. Dressing a beautiful woman in a revealing dress whom we follow like a stalker prior to the rape, *Irreversible* pushes to extremes the contradictory possibilities Young identifies in filmic depictions of rape. The close-ups of Alex's (Monica Bellucci's) beautiful body, which is then violated at length, renders the scene both as alluring *and* as repellent as possible. *Irreversible* then highlights some of Young's criticisms, not thereby contradicting them, but making the spectator aware of their prurient interest in the scene. At the same time, duration is used to evoke realism and the ethical witness, as the spectator watches a static scene of rape for a long time. Taking into account Young's analysis, *Irreversible* is both progressive in making visible the repellent and alluring aspects of rape, and retrogressive for depicting it at all. Young's critique of rape images helps to further demonstrate how new extreme films put forward a transformative ethical framework with their affective long takes of rape, but that there are nonetheless problematic issues that the films do not deal with.

While Young does put forward pertinent criticisms of depictions of rape, her scepticism about progressivism in images of rape stems from a fundamental mistrust about images themselves. This perspective owes much to Sontag's scepticism of photography's power to compel political change (2003), a scepticism I criticised in chapter 1 when I argued that critiquing involves changing them, not rejecting them. Young picks out depictions of rape which do not visualise the act itself (such as *Kill Bill* (2009: 69)) as being the only appropriate solution until "there exists a cinematic ethics as to the depiction of sexual violence – one which would require the invention of a new cinematic grammar" (ibid.: 73). It is hard, however, to see how such a cinematic grammar or ethics can be invented without attempting (and failing) to produce acceptable depictions of rape. We must also bear in mind that one of the progressive aspects of new extreme films is not that they create acceptable depictions of rape, but that they make the

spectator reflect on societal power relations, assumptions about and engagements with (images of) rape. We should therefore separate Young's criticism of how we feel *during* the film, from Brand's contentions about how we will think about that experience *afterwards.* As Silverman notes, there is much to be gained from the retroactive reassessment of the involuntary, perhaps problematic, reactions we have to an image upon seeing it for the first time (1996: 3). Thus even if Young's analysis is correct, films like new extreme films, which encourage a retroactive reassessment of our own reactions to an image, can still work towards politically progressive ends.

Furthermore, we should not see a complicity with images as problematic in and of itself. Our complicity, if acknowledged, might be a productive ethical step in relation to images of rape rather than solely something to be avoided. Even if we are provided with a 'sense of explicability' for the failure of the characters to act (Young 2009: 61), if we are also made aware of our own failure to act, both in the fictional act of rape and in relation to images of rape, then we are alerted to our own complicity in acts and images of sexual violence. Once again, this is not to disagree with Young but to show how films using duration to evoke an ethical witness can make the spectator aware of their complicity in images and society's failure to act upon it sufficiently. In being problematic, in failing to be ethically progressive, films can highlight the patriarchal, phallocentric structures that underlie depictions of rape. As Kozol notes, ethics "derives as much from reckoning with one's own complicity in structures of oppression as it does in any intentional act to ameliorate those conditions" (2014: 15). We know that we cannot help Alex in *Irreversible* because she is a fictional character, but this does not mean that we cannot ask ourselves questions about the nature of rape images, the nature of rape, how we as

a society consider rape as well as revenge, seduction, romance, consent, patriarchy and sexuality. In other words, "an ethical gaze can occur only *through*, not despite, encounters with spectacles of violence" (ibid.).

There are many problematic issues with depictions of rape, issues which apply to new extreme films as much as any other images. Nonetheless, these same images productively and progressively involve the spectator in reflection on, and reassessment of, the complex power structures and interpretative schemas that govern how we look at rape, seduction and romance. New extreme films and their depictions of rape are progressive and retrogressive, divergent political tendencies which cannot be separated. This final section examines these simultaneously existing divergent political tendencies in relation to duration in *Antichrist* and *Battle in Heaven*.

Heteronormative sexuality – *Antichrist*

The long take is not the only means by which duration conveys a palpable sense of the passing of time. *Antichrist* does not have any scenes in which the length of the take draws attention to itself. Nonetheless the film's final depths of physical pain, mental challenge and spectatorial provocation have such an inexorable weight that the film drags the spectator towards this conclusion, highlighting the step-by-step descent into the couple's inferno, as we constantly wish for the film to end. From the opening scene in which the couple's child falls in slow-motion to his death, while his parents copulate in the shower, through the stupid decision of the psychoanalyst husband to treat his distraught wife, while he himself grieves, and to pursue such analysis in a horror-trope-laden cabin in the woods, to the scenes of violent sexually charged bodily (self-)mutilation at the end, *Antichrist* is a downward spiral of extreme proportions. For me, it is one of the most challenging viewing experiences of all the films mentioned in this thesis,

because of its combination of a haptic sensitivity to touch, horror tropes evoking the fear of an irrational being, close-up shots of violence and a deeply troubling ethical outlook which ostensibly countenances the pathologisation of women. Nonetheless, my analysis focuses predominantly on the temporal and durational elements of the film, in terms of the expansion of time in slow-motion, the extended scenes of violence and the narrative structure which give little respite, emphasising the length of the film and the challenge of sitting through to the end.

As the 'prologue' begins, we see slow-motion shots of a shower being turned on, of water falling next to the man and over the woman,[43] of steam floating into an extractor fan, of a bedroom window blowing open with snow outside, of the couple from the torso up having sex in the shower and a close-up shot of visible penetration. In the slow-motion vaginal penetration, we are encouraged not only to note that the couple were having sex when their child died, but in the unusual deceleration of the man's thrusting, of the woman's ecstatically groaning mouth, of the man's testicles swinging forward, we are asked to appreciate each individual penetrating movement, the rubbing of vaginal wall on glans, each drop of water on their faces, the bristles of a toothbrush against her arm. The protagonists' movements are made even more evident in their juxtaposition with the child's movements: as the child slips, his head dropping downwards out of the frame, the following shot is of the woman's head also moving downwards towards the bottom of the frame, but this time as a result of the penetration, a juxtaposition then repeated in a shot of the man. Such movements are more noticeable in slow motion. When the child falls, we see it slowly, as a death in process, as a death which *becomes* in the slow descent. We are presented with the duration of the fall, its existence as brief, tragic precursor to the impact on concrete. Even the impact on the ground is stretched out in the cloud of snow which balloons up around him, followed by his toy landing next to him.

[43] The characters have no names, emphasising the allegorical readings.

A single moment of impact is stretched out so that we do not experience it as a sudden shock but as prolonged duration. The child's death in *Antichrist* is something we endure, and, as such, the film communicates some of the anguish that the parents will soon feel, so that we are made more vulnerable and open to the emotional and physical traumas which populate the rest of the film. From the first images in this film, we are encouraged to consider the processive duration of bodily interactions which makes this scene especially affective and primes us to experience the rest of the (violent) bodily interactions in the film in a similarly proximate way. As Matilda Mroz notes, citing Vlada Petric, "slow motion has a strong emotional impact, partly because it makes viewers aware of 'the *passage of time* and its *rhythmic pressures*'" (2012: 96). In slowing down time, we attend to the minute aspects of movement, and the fact that we notice it passing slowly, means that we are aware of the fact that time is passing.

While the next hour of the film is emotionally intense and erotically charged, the final thirty-five minutes of the film, beginning with the woman attacking the man in the shed, form a relentlessly visceral period of violence, which makes sex and violence visible, and affectively provokes the viewer. As she attacks him, she pulls open his trousers to grab his penis and quickly jumps on top of him, aggressively thrusting and shouting at him. This is similar to some of the highly charged sexual encounters in the preceding parts of the film but the eroticism of the scene is undercut when she jumps off, grabs a wooden log and knocks the man unconscious by slamming it into his genitals. As she collapses on the floor next to him, we see her face in the background and a shift in focus shows his penis in full erection in the foreground despite him being unconscious. In a shot from the man's point of view, the woman then masturbates him (all visible) until he ejaculates blood, spraying red streaks across her blouse. There follows a detailed succession of images that catalogue her drilling a whetstone through the muscle on his leg and throwing away the tools to detach it. We see close-ups of the drilling, of

her poking her fingers into the wound and the sexually charged nature of the violence remains in focus because she is naked from her navel downwards, and the camera repeatedly focuses on the lower half of her body when she walks around. Much of the rest of this excruciatingly long final sequence shows the man trying to hide with the stone attached to his leg (evidently very painful) while the woman searches for him and threatens further violence. The conclusion is a painfully long sequence during which a close-up shows the woman cutting off her clitoris with a rusty pair of scissors before being strangled to death, in close-up, by her husband.

As well as communicating affect in the lingering close-ups of skin, wounds and faces, these scenes are full of sex, sexual imagery and close-ups of genitalia. Moreover, we see visible violence done to the sexual organs, which often provoke a particularly affective response in spectators. Many of the cinematic techniques of visibility and proximity discussed in chapters 2 and 3, such as visible aroused genitalia and close-ups, appear in *Antichrist*, but notably here, they appear in significant duration and as part of a narrative that gives almost no respite from the affective violence, especially in the final half hour. Furthermore, the violence does not fit into a clear narrative chain of cause and effect, either diegetically between the characters or in terms of the visceral discomfort directed towards the spectator. As Grønstad notes in relation to *Irreversible*, "there is little narrative or compositional motivation for showing this kind of cruelty in its actual duration," and as such, "it could be maintained that the scene is not about the violence but about the act of looking at painful images. It is another way of asking, in meta-spectatorial terms, how much of this sort of thing we can endure" (2011: 202). We are being asked to consider our motivations for watching, for continuing to watch, and the reasons why this is an especially unpleasant piece of filmmaking: we are encouraged to ask meta-spectatorial questions. Duration and extreme acts come together to ask us to question how we look at images of violence.

The idea that *Antichrist* alters how we view the world and interpret its underlying ideological construction, is suggested by several scholars who see *Antichrist* as forming a queer or feminist critique of heteronormative patriarchal power structures. Whilst many commentators engage closely with the film's dense intertextuality – drawing out references to psychoanalysis (Zolkos 2011) and witchcraft (Thomsen 2009; Downing 2011) to *The Sacrifice [Offret]* (Tarkovsky, 1986) (Thomsen 2009; Chiesa 2012), *Don't Look Now* (Roeg, 1973) (Downing 2011) and post-modernity (Simons 2015) – Downing, Magdalena Zolkos and Bodil Thomsen see *Antichrist* as entering into debates about the structures that underpin the act of looking. Downing, for instance contends that "*Antichrist* brings to the surface an Edelmanian truth about *ideology*" (2011: 59)[44]; while Thomsen sees the film as a "commentary to our times, when women as well as other manifestations of the Other are killed and sacrificed, just like in the time of the witch trials without any new order of society arising to replace it" (2009: 6). As Downing notes:

> in the wife's sexualized violence towards her husband and in her eventual murder at his hands, the promise of plenitude embodied culturally in the heteronormative reproductive couple is fractured and the symbolic violence underlying its coercive nature is literalized and laid bare. (Downing 2011: 60)

In Downing's account we are made to see the violent structural relations that underpin the heteronormative couple by being viscerally provoked by an extended literalisation of that violence. Similarly, Lorenzo Chiesa's psychoanalytic reading sees the sex and violence as concerning "the representation of the irrepresentable on which human sexuality is founded" (2012: 208–9). These arguments are all framed around a literalisation of violence – physical violence as a representation of societal violences – just as I contended that *Baise-moi, A Hole in my*

[44] This refers to Lee Edelman and his book *No Future* (2004) which examines the heteronormative ideological construction of reproduction.

Heart and *A Serbian Film* also seek to make societal violences visible by literalising them in physical violence.

Žižek (2009) distinguishes between 'subjective', visible, physical violence and 'objective', invisible, systemic violences and I argued in chapter 2 that *Baise-moi* used the visibility of 'subjective' violence to draw attention to the 'objective' violences of patriarchy, an argument I repeated in relation to pornography in *A Hole in my Heart* and *A Serbian Film*. In *Antichrist*, visibility, proximity and duration come together, creating a film-viewing experience that is so challenging and viscerally disturbing for such a long time that the spectator, in feeling physically assaulted by the images, is asked to feel some of the 'objective' violences of heteronormative coupling or human sexuality as 'subjective' physical violence. Such a linkage between visceral discomfort and ways of interpreting images is made explicitly by Zolkos who argues that the "film's 'traumatic' quality is a site where the viewer confronts her/his own pleasure at the sight of another's pain," thus asking us to reflect on how liberal humanist modernity views the world "through economies of rationality and calculation" (2011: 178). The trauma of the viewing experience of *Antichrist* asks us to rethink the ideology of reason on which Western society is based, and to interrogate the logic which underlies how we interpret the world. Although they do not frame it in my terms, Chiesa, Downing, Thomsen and Zolkos can be understood as highlighting the ethical framework outlined in chapter 1. They emphasise how an affective confrontation with the spectator can impact on how the spectator interprets people, acts, events and concepts as well as images of these. In this case it is the couple and their sexuality which is questioned. Techniques of duration as well as proximity and visibility are at the heart of *Antichrist*'s confrontational strategies and the challenging film-viewing experience it provides.

In provoking the spectator viscerally with affective images of sex and violence, *Antichrist* encourages us to reinterpret images of women and the family. In this sense, the film has "the power to re-educate the look," which Silverman sees as essential for ethical films (1996: 5) and "construct[s] another (object of) vision" (de Lauretis 1984: 68) for the spectator. In Downing's reading, the new object of vision in *Antichrist*, is a family whose heteronormative reproductive ideology is visible; while in Zolkos's reading, the man is reconceptualised as using reason as a means of oppression. The use of long scenes and an inexorable pull towards ever more disturbing imagery in *Antichrist*, makes visible the processive duration of the events taking place, provokes the spectator in such challenging ways that they are forced to consider alternative meanings. This next section of the chapter suggests that *Antichrist*'s action-filled panoply of sexualised violences operates comparably to the tranquil *Battle in Heaven*.

Social class and idealised bodies – *Battle in Heaven*

Battle in Heaven depicts the tribulations of working-class chauffeur, Marcos, who is embroiled in a sexual relationship with his employer's daughter, Ana, and a botched kidnapping. It reiterates the long takes, slow pans and sexual tension of Reygadas's previous film, *Japón* (2002), but places visible sexual acts at the forefront of the film by beginning and ending with close-ups of oral sex between the two protagonists and including several long scenes of erotic imagery and visible sex. While the neighbouring images of the Mexican flag being raised and taken down in Mexico City's main square situate the film in discussions of nationhood and identity, it is through the bodily involvement of the protagonists and of the spectators that the film communicates, as much as through its images' visual symbolism. As a film so heavily invested in questions of national identity and the specificities of local socio-political dynamics,

Battle in Heaven has predominantly been discussed through the lens of Mexican or Latin American cinema (Tompkins 2013; Lehnen 2014; Ordóñez Robles 2015; Lahr-Vivaz 2016). This focus leads scholars to read the film allegorically, with the protagonist Marcos representing disenfranchised lower-class indigenous Mexicans and Ana, the daughter of Marcos's employer, representing middle-class property-owning white Mexicans (Lehnen 2014: 4; Ordóñez Robles 2015: 52ff). From a different perspective, *Battle in Heaven* has also been compared to the metaphysical cogitations of Robert Bresson, Carl Theodor Dreyer and Andrei Tarkovsky (de Luca 2010) because of the slow-paced narrative and extensive use of long takes and wide angles. *Battle in Heaven*'s slow pace, long takes and visible extremity must, however, not be seen as separate from socio-political questions of race, class and beauty but rather that techniques of duration are integral to the film's socio-political critique.

Battle in Heaven opens with a close-up of a man's face, glasses on, blinking slightly against a grey background. The camera tracks down, revealing a large man with pronounced breasts and a rotund belly and then a mass of oscillating dreadlocks in front of his crotch. As a single violin note sounds, the camera circles round and zooms in towards his penis. Cutting to a position behind the man, obscuring the dreadlocked person, the camera tracks left and zooms in to reveal a woman with her eyes closed, rocking back and forth with the man's penis in her mouth. The camera zooms in on her eyes, capturing a tear and then goes black. A similar, more smiling scene in which the characters profess their love for each other closes the film. It is hard to know how to understand these scenes: are they dream, fantasy, allegory, gratuitous erotica or shock material? Half way through the film, we cut again to a close-up of a furry brown mass, rocking in front of the camera; breathy noises enter and a hand reaches up to adjust what turns out to be Ana's hair as she removes her headband. We discover it is Ana and Marcos having sex, Ana straddling Marcos, who lies flat on the bed, his face impassioned; he leans up to touch and kiss

her breasts. The image returns to the angle of the first shot but further from the couple so we can see Ana's face which smiles in pleasure; she tells Marcos to stop touching her: 'calm down, Marcos'.

A 206-second shot starting at the side of the bed reveals Marcos, now unmoving, hands by his sides, while Ana thrusts vigorously, the bed shaking and squeaking. Without cutting, the camera dollies back, out the window, and moves upwards, the sounds of copulation receding, being overtaken by noises from surrounding buildings as the camera pans slowly anti-clockwise – capturing children playing in a yard, high-rise buildings in the distance, curtained windows in a building opposite, a radio in a window, a dripping tap, cracks in the paint – before returning through the window, the couple still entwined, Ana unmoving on Marcos's chest. A shot from the ceiling shows Ana dismounting to lie next to Marcos, whose detumescent penis is the only movement in the frame as it flops to one side. They hold hands. We see close-ups of Marcos's face, Ana's crotch, their hands, the soles of their feet. Ana gets up to grab a robe, telling Marcos to leave; Marcos remains unmoving for this entire time. This description shows the interlinking of duration with proximity and visibility in this scene: we are close to Ana's head and skin at the beginning, the sounds of their thrusting emphasising their coitus, but then move far away as the camera exits by the window; the rhythm of their thrusting across cuts reinforces the duration of the scene (6 minutes) until the cityscape and slow pan emphasise the unhurried nature and length of the shot. As we return, we see Marcos's penis slip out of Ana, and flop, ever more flaccid against his skin, the practical, material aspects of intercourse further highlighted by a close-up of Ana's crotch. In the length of the scene, especially the long tracking and panning shot, we become aware of the small aspects of their interaction: her hands on her head, his hands prohibited from her breasts, their positions at the beginning and end which we

can compare within the one shot, just as the small movements in the cityscape capture our attention when the action of the narrative (their sex) is lost from sound- and imagetrack.

Thus the long takes and long scenes of sex, the viscerality of which we encounter intensely as a result of the lack of distractions, encourage us to consider the processive duration of the sex. We are encouraged to consider the practicalities of the sex as the bed creaks rhythmically and Marcos's shifting body throws Ana balance off. In one sense this engages us with the visceral specifics of bodies which do not conform to hegemonic ideals of beauty. As well as this scene, Marcos also appears naked with an erect penis in the long opening and closing sequences, and there is a long and proximate scene where he has sex with his obese wife. As well as simply adding non-hegemonic bodies to the totality of images of sex in narrative feature films, we are encouraged to share in Ana's pleasure when performing fellatio and when having sex with Marcos. We are drawn into their pleasures, rather than being distanced in a position of potential judgement: the camera runs in close-up along his wife's body as Marcos enters her from behind, and also captures in close-up the movements of Ana's head when she thrusts away at Marcos. As Elena Lahr-Vivaz notes, *Battle in Heaven* "offers the possibility of shocking spectators from a state of complacence through images that disrupt their sense of the normal" (2016: 126). These scenes are shocking in the viscerality of the sex and disrupt the 'normal' by using non-hegemonic bodies to evoke viscerality. Moreover, Lahr-Vivaz stresses another aspect to the shocking quality of the images, which is "to disallow spectators' passive acceptance of the images proffered" (2016: 136). Given that the camera gets so close, grazes so carefully over Marcos and his wife's skin, puts us into their perspectives as they copulate, it is difficult to distance oneself from the images. We are asked to reconsider what bodies can count as sexual, arousing and beautiful, we are confronted with the physical, affective power of these bodies. The processive duration which is evoked draws our attention to these characters' touch and

penetration, and encourages us to see these bodies as tender, arousing and sexual even though mainstream images tend to elide them from view, attributing sexuality and arousal more commonly to thin, white people.

Affective images and our awareness of the processive duration of the images are also important for the film's political and ethical outlook because the sex scenes communicate ideas about the nature of the political relations between characters. Samanta Ordóñez Robles (2015: 73) contends that *Battle in Heaven* is a critique of the subjugation of the lower-class brown male body in neoliberal Mexico and uses, as an example, an early scene when Marcos is entirely passive despite being sworn at by passing drivers for not noticing a green traffic light. While her reading is pertinent, highlighting how he is used to being treated badly, it is even more compelling if we look at the sex scenes because our affective engagement and visceral provocation attunes us more to the specificities of the scene. Ana's and Marcos's contiguous nakedness highlights the difference in skin colour, especially when he reaches to touch her breasts: that she is paler than him is made more evident here than in the car. Moreover, while close-ups show Ana's pleasure as she thrusts back and forth, the close-ups on Marcos's face show him tentative and uncertain, his subordinate position emphasised when she then tells him to 'calm down' and stop touching her. The following shot of her thrusting back and forth reinforces his passivity because we can see and hear the creaking consequences of Ana's vigorous arousal on the bed, while Marcos lies completely unmoving. That we are affectively involved in the sex scenes and likely have some expectation of movement or action makes Marcos's passivity (which Ordóñez Robles reads as metaphorical for Mexican lower-class passivity) and Ana's control (metaphorical for white ruling-class power) more noticeable than it was in the car, where events such as cars going past and their continuing conversation act as distractors from the relationship between them.

Moreover, this scene highlights the wider relevance of the power relations in the bedroom by leaving it and, through the 360-degree single-take revolving shot, involving the rest of the community in this comment, "insinuating that the choice of Marcos as protagonist is relatively arbitrary, […] that any of the individuals who hover at the film's margins might have offered an equally telling, equally tragic story had the camera only opted to follow them more closely" (Lahr-Vivaz 2016: 130). The provocative affect of the sex scenes makes more explicit the socio-economic groups the two characters represent, and asks us to look again at how we view the two characters and socio-economic group relations in contemporary Mexico. The socio-political critique is made through the affect of the sex scenes rather than despite it: it is precisely through a visceral provocation of the viewer that we are to rethink how we look at poor indigenous or wealthy white Mexicans.

Nonetheless, there is an uncomfortable sense of exploitation in the use of 'non-professional' actors who are asked to perform visible sexual acts for the camera; not least because the actor who plays Marcos was an employee of the director's family (BBC 2005; Ordóñez Robles 2015: 78) and the actors were not given any context to the scenes when acting them out (Higgins 2005), thus placing the director and the actor in the sort of coercive power relationship that the film critiques. There is an uncomfortable sense, when finding out about the production of the film, that the filmmaker (a wealthy white man) was enacting the problematic power relations at the same time as criticising them. Like so many new extreme films, *Battle in Heaven* is both retrogressive and progressive, pushing forward a progressive political critique using retrogressive production methods. We are asked to rethink accepted notions of beautiful bodies, of social relations and of political power through a literalisation of the societal power structures, but in ways that remain ethically problematic.

Similarly to *Twentynine Palms*, *Battle in Heaven* lacks a coalescing storyline to distract our attention from the materiality of the events taking place: exactly why Ana is working in a brothel, why she was at the airport, why she sleeps with Marcos, what drives Marcos to kill Ana in the film's climactic scene, is unclear. Just as Lübecker suggests that *Twentynine Palms* is uncomfortable and 'feel-bad' partially because the three narrative strands he identifies – metaphysical, political, physical – do not "organically combine" (2015: 118), so does *Battle in Heaven* leave its narrative strands irreconcilable into a chain of cause and effect. De Luca reads the 'carnality' of the film's sex as ultimately irreconcilable with its transcendental considerations; arguing that the flesh "devours the spiritual," he contends that the "'obscenity' of the flesh […] destabilises the transcendentalism" of the film (2010: n.p.). In not combining to some explicable logic, the film's viscerality and metaphysical openness never coalesce into a single world view, neither becoming dominant over the other. Acts are not explained and the narrative is not clearly making any one political point: it is for the viewer to extract a meaning from the provocative confrontations of the film's visceral images. The duration of the scenes opens us up to the processive duration of sex and its metaphorical meaning but does not tell us how to think. We are asked to rethink hegemonic assumptions and look for new interpretations but exactly what these new interpretations should be is unclear.

New extreme duration

My examination of the role of duration in new extreme films has shown that long takes and long scenes can be confrontational and provocative. As well as exposing us to shocking acts of sex and violence, long scenes and long takes evoke a sense of authenticity in that the duration of scenes is comparable to that experienced by the characters. We are encouraged to feel time passing because little else happens in a long scene except the challenging-to-watch act. We are

invited to see the moment-by-moment development of an event, the individual touches, violations and movements rather than subsuming it into a unitary whole. These sensations and feelings give us the sense of witnessing the depicted events and encourage us to see the responsibility that society and film viewers have in the acts we are viewing and how images of them are constructed. We are encouraged to reconsider interpretations of rape in *Free Will*, heterosexual romance in *Fat Girl*, heteronormative coupling in *Antichrist* and idealised bodies in *Battle in Heaven*. We are opened up to the suffering and pleasure of the characters without suggesting that we come to 'know' them or truly understand their experiences. We watch Alex be raped for nearly 10 minutes in *Irreversible*, but in narrative terms, what follows afterwards (which we see before, given the inverse narrative structure) forgets her and does not try to recuperate her experience: it is the reactions of those around her which are central. In *Battle in Heaven*, while we watch Marcos in long takes and see his body in various sexual positions, he rarely speaks, we see little of his home life and we discover little about what motivates most of his actions.

These techniques of long takes/scenes, minimal distractions from the scenes' duration and affectively confrontational material are applied to many topics: grief, rape, romance, witnessing, heteronormative couples, Mexican socio-economic classes and Ukrainian society. Nonetheless, like in chapters 2 and 3, the films are also provocative for engaging with problematic political viewpoints. Female victims are elided in favour of male perpetrators, child rape is presented as something to be welcomed, male rape is shown to be shameful and womanhood is pathologised. The duration for which we are exposed to the acts in new extreme films has the capacity to make us reflect and reconsider commonly applied interpretative schemas, but the same images which encourage progressive ideas also encourage retrogressive thinking in the spectator.

Conclusion

Demonstrating the relevance of bringing together a wide range of films, this thesis has shown that the concept of extremity productively explains what is new and extreme about new extreme films, and how the genre of new extreme films is constructed around the concept of 'extremity'. Furthermore it has shown that an ethical framework based on extremity, provocation and confrontation can be seen in new extreme films. It has also demonstrated the productiveness and necessity of examining new extreme films collectively rather than individually. Nonetheless, this collective analysis must not distract from the films' individual differences and from the specificities of the topics they broach. This conclusion brings the strands of my argument together – addressing extremity, visibility and obscurity, proximity and distance, duration and brevity – and suggests how work on new extreme films might impact on research into genre, transgressive filmmaking and our theoretical assumptions about transgression, political impact and educational artworks.

Chapter 1 set out the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis, arguing that new extreme films are best understood with reference to a theory of extremity based on *extremus* and *exter*. Extremity was understood as the unresolved tensions between *extremus* (just inside a limit) and *exter* (just beyond a limit). The theoretical underpinning of 'extremity' was found in the writings of art historian, Paul Ardenne, who defines the 'superlative spectacle' as containing just *extremus* while the 'extreme spectacle' includes *extremus* and *exter*. This (re)definition of extremity was important firstly to account specifically for the extremity of new extreme films in contrast to other films defined as extreme, and secondly to be precise about new extreme films' transgressions. Numerous films have gained the epithet of 'extreme' (see Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009; Bétan 2012; Frey 2016; Kerner and Knapp 2016) without having such a controversial impact as new extreme films. This thesis's reassessment of extremity accounts specifically for how boundaries are transgressed in new extreme films and how this impacts the spectator.

I argued that visible sex, sexual violence, eroticised menstruation and eroticised childbirth are acts already understood as *extremus* – at the outer limits of the acceptable – and that certain filmic techniques involve pushing visibility, proximity and duration to their limits create an *exter*: very visible or hardly visible images, extreme close-ups and extreme long shots, very long takes and ultra-fast editing are examples of how films can push at the limits of these concepts. Visibility, proximity and duration therefore also function according to *extremus* and *exter*: at and just beyond the limits of the concept. This was contrasted with the maximalist tendencies of other sex- and violence-based genres such as pornography and hardcore horror, which strive to go as far beyond limits as possible.

Analysing the experience of watching films which operate thus, I argued that extremity creates a provocative and confrontational ethical encounter with the spectator. This encounter encourages the spectator to see acts and images from alternative perspectives and to change how they interpret images and events. Nonetheless, this should not lead to the evocation of 'truth' or 'essence', but rather to the presentation of multiple perspectives on ideas often already known to the spectator. I contended that the ethics of extreme images has similarities to the ethical frameworks outlined by Silverman, Kuppers and Kozol who emphasise the transformative power of images, the ultimate unknowability of others, and the need to be aware of our own complicity in images. These scholars propose that we must change how we look at the world to create a more ethically and politically desirable society. Images are seen by these scholars as the central means for changing how we look at and interpret images. I contended that new extreme films attempt to alter our modes of viewing by confronting us with images that challenge the nature of our spectatorship and our complicity within regimes of power that facilitate problematic images of sex and violence. This is ethical because the spectator is encouraged to reflect on the images, rather than being told to think something particular, and because they are confronted with their complicity in the construction of the images without the Other becoming assimilated into the Same. I argued against Michele Aaron by saying that involuntary reactions can form part of this ethical reflection rather than being relegated to un-thought-out moral edicts. Each chapter then focussed on films which most pertinently demonstrate the importance of discussing what is seen, how it is brought close and how long a scene or shot lasts, whilst also progressing my argument about the interconnection of extremity and ethics in new extreme films.

Chapter 2 began the detailed analysis of new extreme films and argued for the importance of considering visibility and obscurity in *Baise-moi*, *A Hole in my Heart*, *Intimacy*, *The Idiots*,

Irreversible, *A New Life*, and *Sombre*. These films were chosen because of the central role what can, and cannot, be seen plays in these films (especially the most violent or sexual scenes), because of the prevalent discussions of visibility and obscurity in debates around these films, and because some of these films' aesthetic techniques (especially the use of handheld cameras, digital cameras, blurred imagery, dark lighting and reduced frame rates) highlight the unusual visibility or obscurity of the events depicted for the camera. I suggested that terms such as 'modal ambiguities', 'authenticity' and 'documentary aesthetic' shed light on how the visibility or obscurity of the pro-filmic events becomes provocative and confrontational. I argued that the visibility of aroused genitals and surgery creates modal ambiguities between fictional space and documentary space because the involuntary bodily reactions of arousal or of skin being cut cannot entirely be contained within the fictional realm of the film. I suggested that modal ambiguities can also be created through the visibility of vomiting, retching and over-eating by evoking disgust, where the spectator's reaction is comparable to their reaction to real-life events, different only in degree rather than type. Drawing on work by Krzywinska on filmed sex and Hanich, Plantinga and Menninghaus on disgust, I contended that the visibility of arousal, vomit, over-eating and surgery introduces a sense of experiencing an authentic rather than a completely fictional version of the depicted acts. Finally, I argued that certain new extreme films draw on a 'documentary aesthetic', giving a further sense of authenticity. The combination of forms of authenticity forms a hyper-visibility which transgresses the limits of the real and the mediated in several overlapping ways. Individual elements such as aroused genitals or vomit form an *extremus* of convention but are seen in pornography and mainstream films. The layering of different forms of extreme visibility or obscurity and of different forms of authenticity pushes these *extremus* elements into an *exter*.

How the pro-filmic events are obscured or made visible forms one central link to extremity. While images infrequently visible in mainstream films such as erect penises, penetration, surgery and ostensibly unsimulated vomiting are shown in new extreme films, they represent only a small portion of a single film's images. Therefore while some images transgress the limits of convention, morality, acceptability or even legality, most of a film's images remain within the accepted limits of arthouse filmmaking even if they push conventions to their limits. Thus while these films do transgress the limits of narrative film conventions, they do so only to a small degree (*exter*), remaining broadly within acceptable boundaries even as common filmic themes such as sex, violence, rape, murder and family relations are pushed towards the limits of what spectators are willing to watch (*extremus*). Moreover, it is the presence in these films not just of one way of transgressing a limit, or one way pushing up against a boundary, but of numerous small transgressions, which is important. There is a wealth of aesthetic, moral, generic and artistic conventions pushed up against and transgressed, leaving few supports the spectator can use to anchor themselves against the film's provocations and confrontations.

Visibility and obscurity are therefore crucial in these films in the creation of a provocative, confrontational address to the spectator where the film's images get under the viewer's skin or inside their bodies by disgusting, arousing, nauseating or disorienting them. This provocative confrontation challenges the spectator to interpret on-screen images in alternative ways. *A Hole in my Heart* asks us to see the violence of pornography; *Baise-moi* makes visible the violences of patriarchal societies; *Irreversible* encourages us to see the stupidity of vengeful violence; *A New Life* asks us to see the cruel horrors of people trafficking and the distorted Western lens through which Eastern Europe is understood. Moreover, these new interpretations make visible aspects of their primary concept (pornography, patriarchal violence, revenge, people traffick-

ing) that was not previously visible. This draws on Žižek's distinction between the visible 'subjective' violence of physical assaults, and the invisible 'objective' violences of systems and societies; the films make visible 'objective' violences by turning them into 'subjective' violences.

However a simple valorisation of visibility was shown to be problematic. Firstly, the assumption that being visible is better than not being visible needs challenging, because it falls into a 'trap of thinking' highlighted by Foucault in his examination of discourses around sexuality. This 'trap' is to think that sexual liberation is inherently better than sexual repression; in fact, these are both superficial manifestations of complex power structures, and thus sexual 'liberation' can be just as repressive as a sexually 'repressive' system (Foucault 1978). Secondly, the assumption that a 'truthful' interpretation of a concept can be made visible in the face of other 'false' interpretations is also problematic because it assumes that there is a transcendental truth to the concept being discussed. I argued that we see this in *Baise-moi* and *A Hole in my Heart* where patriarchy and pornography respectively are shown to be understandable *only* in terms of patriarchal or phallocentric violence. Given that new extreme films attempt to destabilise hegemonic discourses and show alternative ways of interpreting images of sex, violence and women, it is hypocritical to reinstate a monolithic understanding of those concepts in place of those original discourses. It is more important to work through societal power relations than be concerned about what sex 'means'. Somewhat in contrast, *The Idiots*, *Sombre* and *A New Life* challenge us to reappraise how we interpret images of sex, violence, Eastern Europe and serial killers, whilst providing such a variety of images that no 'truth' of these concepts is suggested. Not only do these films challenge conventional interpretations of particular topics but they suggest that the thinking process they provoke is in itself the important ethical act: changing

how we think is a significant ethical step but we must reflect carefully, never allowing one thought to coalesce into a 'truth' of a situation.

Chapter 3 examined two forms of proximity: diegetic proximity (the proximity, contact, penetrations, perforations and extirpations of diegetic bodies) and spectatorial proximity (between images of these bodies, and the viewer). The chapter investigated the contacts we are brought close to, including sex, bodily mutilation, rape, murder and bodily functions. I suggested that the communication of proximity can evoke the material qualities of bodies and objects, bringing us experientially closer to the acts. Just as I argued in chapter 2 that forms of obscurity encourage us to see the world in ways that cannot be communicated by clear, well-framed, visible images, I contended that forms of proximity also show that valuable information can be sought through non-visual senses. Not only can this information be valuable but it can challenge hegemonic forms of knowledge. Drawing on work by Irigaray (1985), Marks (2000, 2002) and Beugnet (2006, 2007, 2010), and their emphasis on the artistic and philosophical potential of sensation, I argued that the evocation of materiality and touch affectively engages the spectator in the depicted acts and encourages them to rethink the films' images and acts by giving the spectator a new sensorial experience. From Irigaray, I took the argument that a purely visual 'photo-logical' emphasis fails to take into account all aspects of the world and in itself is tied to the current dominant structures, namely patriarchal phallocentrism (Vasseleu 1996). I drew on Marks's theory of haptic visuality and Beugnet's 'cinema of sensation' to argue that the extreme close-up can circumvent dominant cultural interpretations by removing something from social, class and gender contexts and allowing us to imagine alternative ways of interpreting it. Caressing movements across a piece of skin can give minute detail on its palpitations, a sense of the skin's touch, taste or smell, before we see the whole body. The

extreme close-up gives access to modes of experiencing this body that are irreducible to the visual and opens up a space beyond the dominant cultural codes which govern the visual.

I suggested that, although this proximity is employed in relation to different topics – sex, sexuality, rape, gender politics, pregnancy, menstruation, self-harm, pornography, postcolonialism, Serbian politics and Hungarian politics – the same confrontational ethical perspective identified in chapters 1 and 2 is identifiable in the films analysed in this chapter. In *9 Songs* the material presence of the lovers' bodies and the camera's regular presence between these bodies communicate a form of explicit sex that pushes beyond the boundaries of pornographic images. In *Romance* and *Anatomy of Hell*, we are asked to reconceptualise the female body as active rather than passive, as based on productivity rather than lack, by being brought close to images of childbirth, menstruation, contraception and sex. *In My Skin* encourages us to see the networks of power that control women's bodies through a violent material engagement with the body, namely self-harm. In *Trouble Every Day*, the neo-colonialist construction of Africa is placed in question through our proximate engagements with bodies torn apart by a disease Western scientists contracted when pillaging African resources. In *A Serbian Film*, our envelopment in the violent world of a snuff film set and the proximate evocation of bodies forced together becomes a political allegory about the violence of contemporary Serbian society and a call for the spectator to rethink the pleasures of pornography. Finally, the affectively charged scenes of sex, the cold, eating, vomiting, taxidermy and self-mutilation in *Taxidermia* become a sensual exploration of dominant discourses about History.

As in chapter 2, several of these films were criticised for their approach to questions of 'truth'. Just as I read *A Hole in my Heart* as presenting pornography as inherently violent, so I argued that *A Serbian Film*'s depiction of the violence of pornography, and the film's clear distinction

between pornography and 'good' sex, suggest that violence is the 'truth' of pornography. I suggested that *Romance*'s and *Anatomy of Hell*'s valorisations of heterosexual penetrative sex as the ultimate means of understanding sexuality connote heterosexual coitus as the 'truth' of sex and the only means to understand relations between genders. Such suggestions undermine how the films have sought to destabilise dominant interpretations of images because they reinstate monolithic discourses. Not only are the films discussed in chapter 3 philosophically problematic, but some of these films also pose significant ethical problems. *Romance*'s insistence on the binary separation of the genders and the sweeping statements about men and women demonstrate fixed ideas about gender even as the film encourages us to change how we look at women and their bodies. *Anatomy of Hell*'s rejection of the male protagonist's homosexuality, and presumption that he can only understand his sexuality through sexual contact with a woman, demonstrates an uncomfortable heteronormativity. While *9 Songs* investigates bodies in ways that challenge the conventional viewing frameworks of heterosexual pornography, it nonetheless remains heavily invested in a male gaze with shots frequently emphasising woman's to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey 1975) and man's subjectivity. While these films present ideas that can be understood as part of a progressive political project in their proximate engagement of the spectator with the bodies, people and events depicted in the diegesis, some of these films demonstrate retrogressive political viewpoints. I show that proximity is integral to understanding the ethical encounter between the spectator and a new extreme film, but that we cannot draw clear conclusions about the political perspective communicated in that encounter.

Chapter 4 focussed on duration through long takes and long scenes in new extreme films, especially during the most violent or sexually charged sequences. Drawing on Stanley Keeling's

distinction between ‘unitary’ and ‘processive’ duration, I argued that these long scenes communicate the temporal process of the depicted acts: we are encouraged to see the moment-by-moment passing of an event, to see its developmental stage-by-stage progression, rather than to see the entire event as an undifferentiated completed whole. I suggested that the long take and long scenes evoke ‘processive’ duration through the feeling of experiencing time at the same pace as the protagonists. A focus on the passing of time is emphasised in new extreme films by the lack of other changes to distract from this focus on duration: the camera often remains still or moves very slowly, there is little movement within the frame except for the event we are watching, there is little extra-diegetic music, the narrative often progresses slowly in these moments, and there is often little dialogue.

Drawing on Roy Brand’s idea of the ethical witness, I argued that this communication of ‘processive’ duration evoked something of the experience of being there with the characters and of witnessing an event. The long take and the long scene can evoke a sense of authenticity as we view many of the small, inconsequential aspects of the characters’ lives which might ordinarily be edited out of a mainstream film scene, and thus make us feel more connected to the character’s experience of a scene. Following Brand, I argued that although the spectator of such a scene or film is not a witness to the events in the conventional, ontological meaning of ‘witness’, they become ethical witnesses, continuing to think about what they have been exposed to. Such reassessments of the image mean that witnessing filmic events can have an impact on how we as a society think about events in the future. The camera in new extreme films rarely adopts the subjective position of a lover, an aggressor or a victim, but is often placed in a position which can be understood by the spectator as that of a witness. Moreover, new extreme films often include a diegetic witness in their extreme scenes to emphasise the fact that the spectator partakes in witnessing the event. New extreme films do not make us inhabit those

experiencing extreme events, but make us think about the act of watching, that we as a society watch such events, that film viewers watch such events, and that a witness to an event has the possibility of getting involved in the event itself. We are unable to stop the rape, the murder, the assault or take part in the sexual tryst, but we can rethink our engagement with images of sex and violence, and we can think about and act upon society's reactions to, or inaction in the face of, certain images. I argued that the evocation of 'processive' duration can emphasise the spectator's position as witness and encourage them to rethink their relation to images of sex and violence, and perhaps take action in response to these.

Experiencing duration in this way encourages a rethinking by the spectator of community, rape, grief, guilt, revenge, seduction, bodily stereotypes and witnessing. In *The Tribe* we become witnesses to sex, violence, rape, abortion, prostitution, torture and murder, and are asked to engage corporeally with the processive development of this increasingly violent and uncontrollable community. In *Free Will* we are encouraged to consider the individual acts of control, violence and sadism that constitute a rape, and to consider how a rapist might relate to his horrific crimes. In *The Brown Bunny* we are brought close to a grieving man and the numbness that can envelop a person dealing with loss. *Antichrist*'s increasingly challenging images ask us to reconsider the ideological underpinnings of the heterosexual family unit, to witness deaths and sex acts, and to reflect on how trauma and grief make us relive the minutiae of these tragic moments. *Irreversible* asks us to consider society's role in real acts of rape and their on-screen depictions. Moreover, we are encouraged to see the act of revenge as unjustified, an irrational, unhelpful response to violence. *Fat Girl* encourages us to reconsider our understanding of romance and seduction, and to see them as underpinned by male sexual aggression, societal countenance of female sexual submissiveness, and an underlying acceptance of sexual assault and rape. *Twentynine Palms* we are asks us to be witnesses to the senselessness and horror of rape,

murder and suicide, with an emphasis placed on our witnessing of the act of rape, although the ethical effect of this remains disconcertingly unclear. *Battle in Heaven* asks us to consider race and class relations in contemporary Mexican society, and think through the societal discourses that govern our understanding of them.

Having said this, as with the films discussed in chapters 2 and 3, we must still be critical of the films examined in chapter 4. Looking at the depiction of trauma in *The Brown Bunny* and *Free Will*, although the rape victims were all women, the films' focus is the suffering of male perpetrators of, or witnesses to, these attacks. Although the opening sequence of *Free Will* is a gruelling depiction of the female victim's suffering, the two films elide the trauma of female victims in favour of the grief or emotional difficulties faced by the male perpetrators and witnesses. *Irreversible* was shown to be infused with a profound homophobia through its use of an S/M gay club as a representation of the Dantesque circles of hell even if the rapist's homosexuality can be understood as highlighting rape's links to power and violence, not sex or erotic desire. *Fat Girl*'s penultimate scene shows the protagonist embracing her rapist after seeking to repulse his violent advances; although this movement makes sense within the story's provocative logic, the image of a young girl submitting to rape and showing tenderness towards her rapist is problematic for the perspective that this isolated image can give of child rape.

These provocative confrontations therefore venture into deeply problematic territory, where perpetrators' suffering is emphasised over the victims', where a child appears to consent to being raped and where alternative homosexual practices pave the route to hell. The provocation is at times evocative of a progressive form of ethical witnessing, asking us to reconsider how our society treats people, judges crimes and interprets images. At other times it is retrogressive, repeating ideas of victim shame, sexualising rape victims and reinforcing homophobia. While

not all the films discussed in this thesis evince clearly retrogressive tendencies, ethical ambivalence represents a common trait in new extreme cinema, and adds further to the controversy that these films arouse.

Genre and categorisation

The difficulty of categorising new extreme films as either progressive, retrogressive or something else, underpins many debates around new extreme films. While *Fat Girl* was praised as a spokespiece "for young girls pressured into hurtful sexual experiences" (Barker 2010: 158) and *Irreversible* for being "ethically, generically, subjectively" disruptive (Brinkema 2004), *Fat Girl* was decried elsewhere as dreadful, ugly and lacking morality (Tesson 2001: 81–82) while *Twentynine Palms* was called a "failure of both imagination and morality" (Quandt 2011a: 24). New extreme films are seen as both productively challenging and reductively exploitative: progressive and retrogressive conclusions are drawn from the same films and this is repeated across the corpus often within single analyses. As Joan Hawkins notes about James Quandt, originator of the term 'New French Extremity':

> [he] cannot decide whether [new extreme films] have more in common with the "épater les bourgeois" spirit of the French Surrealists or with the work of the right-wing anarchist hussards of the 1950s, […] whether the films of these new cinematic provocateurs align politically with the Left or with the Right, whether they are culturally progressive or reactionary. In a sense, […] they are both and it is perhaps this imbrication — or perhaps dialectic — of liberal and conservative tendencies which makes the films so deeply troubling. (Hawkins 2009)

Hawkins' comments highlight difficulties with political categorisation (between left/liberal/progressive and right/conservative/reactionary), a historical-intellectual difficulty (Surrealists or anarchists) and a methodological difficulty in elucidating how they negotiate tensions (dialectically or in terms of imbrication). Just as I have noted that simple ideas about transgressing boundaries do not account for new extreme films, so do these binaries not account for the films. As Palmer notes, dismissals of new extreme films often rest upon: "a restrictive, traditionalist notion that film art derives entirely from a political dichotomy: either it is progressive (challenging the viewer in order to yield didactic leftist social diagnoses) or reactionary (beguiling the viewer in order to reinforce rightist social perspectives)" (2002: 14). As I have noted, new extreme films cannot be understood as conforming to notions either of progressivism or retrogressivism, not least because any 'didactic leftist social' critique is frequently inseparable from reactionary rightist ideology.

On the one hand it is commonplace to assert that a film contains structures from multiple genres. Modern scholars of genre demonstrate that any text participates in multiple genres and therefore that no film is reducible to one genre (see Neale 2000; Chandler 1997 for overviews of genre debates). On the other hand, the confusions that Quandt encounters (described above by Hawkins) suggest that such films not only participate in several genres, but in doing so, they bring these generic structures into question. Indeed are new extreme films not often at the limit of or just beyond what can conventionally be understood as the boundaries of categories such as progressive or retrogressive filmmaking? I suggest not only that extremity, understood as *extremus* and *exter,* can elucidate how new extreme films should be understood generically, but also that extremity might be a useful concept within genre studies more broadly.

In the introduction, I pointed to a participatory conception of genre, drawn from Frey via Derrida, as being useful for giving some definition of extreme images. To explain how this concept of genre can be further improved through a consideration of extremity, we must consider that genres in which a film participates must be understood according to clusters of concepts, and that within these clusters certain concepts will be of greater or lesser importance in determining the genre. Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of 'family resemblances' to explain categories (his example is 'game'), demonstrates the "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (1986: 32, §66) that underpin categories, with concepts sometimes being better explained indirectly by examples than a direct definition (ibid.: 34, §71). Even within the framework of genre as participatory we must approach genres indirectly from several perspectives, through numerous divergent examples.

Futhermore, prototype theory demonstrates how terms within a category are not equally demonstrative of a category with certain "perceptually salient 'natural prototypes'" embodying the "most typical example of the category" (Rosch 1973: 328) and others fitting the category less evocatively. Thus in contrast to the classical view of categories as discrete bounded entities which delimit elements exhibiting shared properties (e.g. 'birds' have feathers and can fly) categories should be understood "in terms of a prototype[45] […] of the category, surrounded by other [terms] of decreasing similarity to the prototype and of decreasing degree of membership" (ibid.: 193). Within a genre, not all members are equal but the limits of the genre are also not clear with membership 'decreasing' rather than being asserted or denied.

[45] Although as she later notes, the prototype is a concept, not an actualisable entity: "what is really referred to are judgements of degree of prototypicality" (in Lakoff 2012: 44).

Derrida contributes to these debates by arguing that we should not talk of 'membership' of a genre but rather of 'participation'. Derrida argues that "every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (1980: 65). Although Derrida does not mention Rosch, the move from belonging to participation repeats Rosch's central intervention that items within a category do not fit that category equally well: where 'belonging' suggests a clear in-or-out definition, it is possible to participate to a greater or lesser degree. Derrida employs set theory to consider the interconnecting elements which ground our understanding of genre, arguing that genre as a notion is based upon contamination, impurity and parasitism (1980: 59). He argues that genre is a fundamentally contradictory concept which he explains with terms such as 'titleless title', 'mentionless mention', a 'belonging which does not belong' or 'account of an accountless account' (ibid.: 63-73); as such, the set which denotes a genre occupies the impossible position of "an internal pocket larger than the whole" (ibid.: 59), a subset which is also a superset. For Derrida, the apparent contradictions within definitions of genre are not riddles that future research will eventually decipher; rather, impossible contradictions are inherent to the construction of genre itself, what he calls 'the law of the law of genre' (ibid.).

Considering how genre is actually employed in relation to art provides some further complications to genre theory that are especially relevant within a media context. Both Wittgenstein and Rosch, for instance, assume that all respondents agree on which words belong to categories such as 'game' and 'furniture' even if they cannot explain why. However, had they chosen 'sport' as their category, would not some have argued not only that bridge or chess are not prototypical, but that they simply *are not* sports? This becomes especially problematic when we consider neologisms, such as 'New French Extremity', which are often coined by a single person and lack the historically-agreed-upon wealth of examples available when explaining the

meaning of ‘game’ or ‘furniture’. Moreover, film genres are not only attempts to categorise and explain, but are subject to competing interests and interpretations; distributors and advertisers have a huge financial interest in defining films and genres in ways that resonate with filmgoers and ultimately increase sales. As Steve Neale notes, genre is “an important ingredient in any film’s narrative image. […] what the industry considers to be the generic framework – or frameworks – most appropriate to the viewing of a film is therefore one of the most important functions performed by advertising copy, and by posters, stills and trailers.” (2000: 35) Successfully marketing a film as ‘horror’ targets particular audiences to create revenue. In genre terms, this is important, firstly, because the marketing of a film impacts heavily on how critics and the public initially engage with a film, and therefore how they will be likely to categorise it, especially before they have seen it. Secondly, because films which do not prototypically participate in a given genre may be marketed as though they do in order to attract fans of prototypical examples of the genre.

Choi and Wada-Marciano highlight this in relation to the label Asia Extreme (2009: 5). As mentioned in chapter 1, this moniker was attached to wildly different films. Furthermore, Frey emphasises that the advertising for many extreme films positions them as sexy erotic thrillers or gory escapades even though the films do not countenance such a reading: he comments especially on American advertising of European arthouse films from the 1970s, sold based on the “liberal representations of nudity, sex and other taboos” rather than any claims to artistic profundity (2016: 5). More recently, Frey notes how many hardcore art films employ similar aesthetics in their marketing, despite manifest differences between the films; marketing commonly seeks reductive, transferable images which ultimately mislead consumers about the films (ibid.: 194). Nonetheless he points out that part of what academics might consider misleading arises because these hardcore art films must not only be considered

within a history of arthouse sexual images and other contemporary 'extreme' films, but also with other less high-brow media artefacts within the discourse of which sexually explicit scenes likely circulate. For instance, he suggests that we should look at *The Brown Bunny* with its final fellatio scene between then off-camera couple Vincent Gallo and Chloë Sevigny in the context of celebrity sex videos by Paris Hilton or Tommy Lee rather than only in the context of other arthouse sex scenes. What these comments highlight is that different stake-holders can have disparate views on a film's genre: while I initially discovered *Irreversible* after watching *Funny Games*, *Hidden* and *The Piano Teacher*, some viewers will have wanted to test their mettle against an infamously challenging film, others will have been attracted by the star cast, some will have followed Noé since *Carne*, others will have hoped to see sexual authenticity between then real-life couple Cassel and Bellucci, others will have sought images to fuel their pornographic imaginary (the rape scene can be found on internet porn sites),[46] while others will have watched it as a contemporary rape-revenge thriller in the mould of *Last House on the Left* (see Kermode and James 2003). Thus for some it is endurance cinema, for others star cinema, pornography, daring arthouse masterpiece or exploitation horror flick, even if academics frequently define it as a new extreme film. As Chandler notes, "practitioners and the general public make use of their own genre labels (*de facto* genres) quite apart from those of academic theorists. We might therefore ask ourselves 'Whose genre is it anyway?'" (1997: 2). Indeed even amongst academic theorists, there is no consensus on whether *Irreversible* should be grouped together with *The Life of Jesus* and *Martyrs* or not.

Considering genre thus, let us look at new extreme films and *extremus*/*exter* in two ways: firstly to suggest that *extremus*/*exter* can help illuminate new extreme films' relationship to genre;

[46] Frey notes how decontextualized scenes from numerous extreme films can be found on internet porn sites (2016: 203–4).

and secondly to suggest that *extremus*/*exter* may be useful in future developments in genre theory.

In Derridean terms, *9 Songs* participates in numerous genres including narrative film, art film, mainstream film, hardcore art film and pornographic film. It is normally considered to be an art film because director, Michael Winterbottom, has significant arthouse credentials, because it was positioned as such in interviews with the director and the actors (e.g. Davies 2004; Hennigan 2005), because it screened at art-film festivals such as the Cannes film festival and because the uncut version went on general release around the world. Nonetheless, aesthetically, the film participates in the genre of pornography: there are numerous acts of visible penetration and long scenes of sex devoid of other plot progression, there is little or no narrative justification for many sex scenes, the images will be understood by many as arousing and there is an emphasis in interviews with the actors on the job-like nature of the endeavour (e.g. Davies 2004). *9 Songs* therefore participates extensively in both pornography and arthouse film. If we consider genre in terms of negative cohesion, a key element which conventionally marks something as *not* mainstream (understood here as films not restricted to licensed sex shops), is the visibility of aroused genitals and/or penetrative sex. Conversely, elements which are often used to mark a film as *not* pornographic are intellectual rigour or a lack of spectator arousal. A film which is intellectually stimulating or not arousing yet contains visible sex therefore poses category-assignment issues because it is both pornography and not pornography, and at the same time, is denied entry into both pornography and non-pornography. Understood thus, *9 Songs* fits into both categories but also into neither; with many genres this is not a problem as hybrid sub-genres such as the horror-comedy or the musical-western attest. However, given that the

distinction between pornography and non-pornography is often a legal one, and both lawmakers and the public are especially invested in moralistic controls of sexuality, this boundary is a particularly fraught one.

Sub-genres such as 'art erotica' and 'hardcore art film' seem designed precisely to overcome this difficulty, suggesting an overlapping area in the Venn diagram of pornography and non-pornography. However, this implies that the categories can be harmlessly combined and forgets that there is much at stake in designations of pornography or non-pornography. 'Pornography' is not a neutral signifier and is pejoratively connoted as artistically worthless and morally suspect: thus Winterbottom will vehemently declare "it's not porn!" (Hennigan 2005) because he cannot give ground to the suggestion that it may be both pornography and not pornography. Designating something as pornography is too politically and artistically charged such that those making explicit arthouse films must entrench themselves in the denial of any connection to pornography because their films are so close to being considered as such. As Brian McNair notes, "'art' and 'porn' do not mix, even if there is ample room for creative interplay between the two forms" (2013: 140); in lay terms, you cannot be both art and pornography so in order to be art you must deny any connection to pornography. At the same time, given that an internet search of '9 Songs porn' brings up dozens of porn websites with scenes from the film, which made just £200 000 at the UK box office (ibid.), it seems likely that many viewers will watch the film from the perspective of pornography, designed for titillation and arousal rather than as a work of art. As Frey notes, within films like *9 Songs*, "the two modes [art film and pornography] cannot exist without one another; they are symbiotic in that they depend upon each other for their recognition as supposedly distinctive modes. This is not simply a matter of convergence, the melting of previously rigid formal or medial boundaries, or any postmodern inversions of hierarchies" (2016: 205). Considering new extreme films as engaging with genre

boundaries according to *extremus* and *exter* can nuance a simple Venn diagram and account for the films' disruptive position in genre designations.

The concept of extremity – understood as *extremus* and *exter* – provides a useful way of considering more precisely the symbiosis Frey discusses because although his analysis is pertinent, his term still implicitly suggests that in a new extreme film, the art-film and pornographic elements are separable, if interdependent. In nature, mutualistic symbiosis occurs when two species benefit from a relationship; this can lead to co-evolution, whereby each species, known as a symbiont, evolves in ways specifically linked to each other.[47] Although one symbiont's evolution is tied to the other's, they are always separable: the boundaries between the categories remain clear and fixed. That being said, I agree with Frey that any suggestion of convergence of categories, the dissolution or inversion of boundaries is also untenable. New extreme films such as *9 Songs*, have elements which operate *both* at and beyond the limits of mainstream film *and* at and beyond the limits of pornography. Most criticism about new extreme films takes for granted that these films are art films (a sub-genre of mainstream films) and that they therefore participate in or 'borrow from' genres such as pornography and horror rather than being pornographic/horror films which 'borrow from' art films. Rather than trying to turn these hierarchies on their head, or dissolve the distinctions between them, we should see new extreme films as operating at and beyond the limits of different genres depending on the perspective that one takes. Audience expectations are important in genre conceptions and these will differ from viewer to viewer. What makes new extreme films 'extreme' is not that they operate at and beyond the limits of one category ('arthouse film' for instance) but that they operate at and beyond the limits of several adjoining genres.

[47] For a useful summary of symbiotic coevolution see Lin and others (2017)

This means firstly that viewers struggle to categorise the films, often reading them simultaneously in multiple ways. We see this in reviews of *9 Songs* which was castigated as being "neither sizzling porn nor provocative art" (Christopher 2005) and derided because "as an experiment, it's a failure. As pornography, it's untitillating" (Dawson 2005). These quotations argue that it is bad pornography (it's not 'sizzling') and not pornography ('it's untitillating') but also that it is a bad art (it's not 'provocative') and not art ('it's a failure'). However, if something is bad pornography, then it *is* pornography; if something is *not* pornography, then it cannot be bad pornography. According to these accounts, *9 Songs* appears to be both (bad) pornography and not pornography at all. The same is true from the art film perspective: its sex scenes are supposed to be provocative (for Christopher) and so it is art but bad art; but Dawson defines it as a failure, suggesting perhaps that it's bad art, perhaps that it's not art at all. Once again it is both art and not art, both inside and outside of the limits of the critics' conceptual categories, at the same time and within the same sentence. Taken together, *9 Songs* is both and neither: if it participates then it is at an edge of what is acceptably within the genre (*extremus*) because it is a bad version of that genre, but it is also seen as being beyond the boundaries of the genre too (see figure 1).

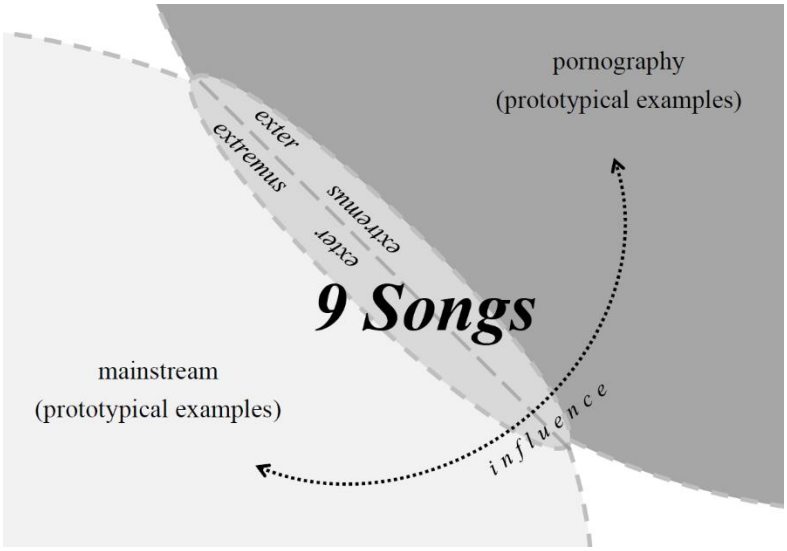


Figure 1: Diagram of extremity, 9 Songs

For these reasons, the concept of extremity, as *extremus* and *exter*, usefully isolates how new extreme films can be understood in relation to genre limits, here between pornography and art

film. As we can see in figure 1, *9 Songs* is at the *extremus* and *exter* of *both* mainstream film *and* pornography. We should look at new extreme films from both perspectives (and others as well, depending on the film, e.g. horror, exploitation, non-narrative film). Considering new extreme films as such points more specifically to their relationship to, for instance, art and pornography, helping to see how they are generically disruptive and how insufficient sub-genres such as 'hardcore art film' or 'art erotica' turn out to be on an analytical level even if they can be intuitively useful. Let us now consider how a different film *A Hole in my Heart* also corresponds to such a diagram, introducing the categories of retrogressive and progressive film into the theory.

A Hole in my Heart can be understood as pornography. Firstly, it positions itself thus, chronicling the making of a porn film largely through images destined to become a diegetic porn film. Secondly, it positions itself as a 'true' porn film, one which, although ostensibly unlike most pornography, is a depiction of what pornography 'really is'.[48] Thirdly, it was felt to be arousing and an element of sexual interaction by a couple in a Swedish cinema who allegedly had sex during a screening (Brooks 2005). Finally, looking at certain degrading forms of pornography, it is less different from mainstream pornography than one might think: although the food-fight and vomit sequences may be disgusting to many viewers, some will likely find them arousing.[49] Considering *Fuck Sasha Grey* (2010), nominated for numerous awards at the Adult Video News awards and starring one of the most famous porn performers at the time, Sasha Grey, many scenes are similar to those in *A Hole in my Heart*. There are many scenes of anal sex without lubricant, of 'face-fucking' with choking noises and spit flying everywhere, of abusive, demeaning language directed at Grey, of masked men engaging in violent sex (choking, face-

[48] See chapter 2.
[49] Scenes from the film can be found on porn websites: https://fr.xhamster.com/videos/sanna-brading-swedish-actress-a-hole-in-my-heart-2818755

grabbing and spanking). There is a scene that takes place in a toilet and the final scene is coded as rape with painful noises issuing from Grey throughout. The drooling and choking of the sausage-stuffing scene in *A Hole in my Heart* then seems to be less a disturbing parody of porn than a repetition of a porn scene; the brutality, abuse and disgust do not so much bring forth the violences of pornography as repeat images already available in mainstream pornographic films. While arthouse film viewers may be shocked at the images in *A Hole in my Heart*, they may be readily recognisable to viewers of pornographic films such as *Fuck Sasha Grey*.

Moreover, as Larsson points out, while the images in *A Hole in my Heart* seem clearly designed to counter conventional ideas about the arousing nature of pornographic imagery, especially emphasising the exploitative nature of porn work, the images of surgery are no more or less exploitative than images of women having sex, borrowing from the ideology of pornography if not its exact imagery (2011). This critique is mirrored by the director's own comments about the film: "I decided not to care if it became exploitative […] the film becomes part of what it's talking about. It is a symptom, not a diagnosis" (Moodysson in Brooks 2005). This idea of pornography but also not, art but also not, is suggested by Shirley Jordan in relation to *Baise-moi* which, she argues, succeeds in creating "a sort of anti-pornography or an anti-chauvinist pornography in the sense that it diminishes the man and prohibits unproblematic and uninterrupted pleasure" (2002: 137). If we read *A Hole in my Heart* similarly, we can see it as a form of pornography but one that is far from prototypical: it displays what it considers to be the 'true' nature of pornography and therefore *is* pornography; if it is anti-chauvinist or anti-pornographic pornography, then it *is* still pornography if not sharing the ideology of most pornography; if it is a symptom as the director states, then it *is* pornography; if it shares the visual ideology of pornography, then it *is* pornography. It is however at the limits of the genre given

that it explicitly attacks and attempts to undermine the genre, that it seeks to explore the opposite sensations of those conventionally sought as well as being beyond these boundaries: it was on general release in many countries and contains no images of visibly aroused genitals or penetrative sex.

A Hole in my Heart is designed as an anti-porn film, seeking to disgust mainstream or arthouse-film viewers rather than arouse niche porn viewers. As Larsson notes (2011: 143) feminist views in Sweden converge tend overwhelmingly towards an anti-pornography perspective and Moodysson allies himself closely with this ideology. Like *9 Songs*, it is directed by a celebrated arthouse director and is positioned as an arthouse film in publicity, critical reviews and by the director himself. Crucially, it also features no images of visible penetration, a key feature of the vast majority of heterosexual pornography, which in negative terms discounts it from being pornography. Looking at it from a different perspective, that of the art film, it is also at and beyond the limits of this genre. It is a provocative sexualised film about a politically sensitive issue and therefore follows in a grand tradition of transgressive art films which push at the boundaries of audience expectations, of censorship boundaries and of what spectators are willing to experience. At the same time, like *Baise-moi*, *A Hole in my Heart* is gritty, grainy, shaky and coarse: its images are not filmed with a traditionally beautiful or respected aesthetic like the rape scene of *Last Tango in Paris* or the aftermath of murders in *Weekend*. The grainy digital footage, jump-cuts and close-up self-filmed interviews reference pornography and home videos more than conventional arthouse filmmaking. Add to this the claustrophobic setting, the unsubtle lighting and amateurish aesthetic and the film pushes at the limits of the boundary of art film and the conventions of home-video pornography.

Being all of these things, *A Hole in my Heart* finds itself at and beyond the limits of progressive and retrogressive filmmaking. It is progressive in pushing for women's rights, in challenging traditional ideas about pornography, in actively seeking to 'make the world a better place' and in displaying taboo images to encourage public debate. Nonetheless it is reactionary in seeking to censor a form of expression (pornography) and retrogressive in succumbing to its target ideology when trying to critique it and trying to invert rather than overcome hierarchies. In being both progressive and non-progressive, retrogressive and non-retrogressive, *A Hole in my Heart* undermines the distinctions between these two broad genres of filmmaking because it is neither and both at the same time; and yet they are apparently diametrically opposed concepts. Just as art and porn are felt to be unmixable categories, so are progressive and reactionary (or retrogressive) felt to form an unbridgeable dichotomy which does not allow for mixing or convergence. Therefore being both and neither forms a problematic category disruption that can be explained by considering how these films contain elements in the *extremus* and *exter* of several categories.

Returning to Hawkins' comments about our inability to separate the liberal and conservative, left-wing and right-wing, Surrealist and anarchist tendencies within new extreme films, thinking of these films as demonstrating elements of *extremus* and *exter* of these ostensibly opposite categories provides an appropriately nuanced means of conceiving of their tendencies that does not force us to choose a category nor deny that these categories exist. It demonstrates what is so troubling about these films and why they are so conceptually disruptive. Thus new extreme films challenge and disrupt limits without resolving comfortably into a new genre or dissolving the distinctions between conventionally accepted boundaries. Just because boundaries are blurred, does not mean that they do not exist for us when we watch a film. In the case of new extreme films, the concepts of *extremus* and *exter* explain how they remain so disruptive in a

generic sense. As I suggested in the introduction to this thesis, the inadequacy of existing cinematic categories to new extreme films is one of the provocative difficulties that the films pose to viewers, who remain unsure how to approach them. As Barker et al note about two viewers of *Baise-moi*, "to put it simply, they can't decide *how to watch* the film" (2007: 90).

Furthermore, this way of thinking about genre boundaries may be useful for thinking about other genres, sub-genres or groupings. Delving further into genre theory, extremity as a concept may provide new avenues forward for thinking about categories and genre. This last section on genre briefly examines two perspectives on genre: by Tzvetan Todorov on the 'fantastic' and by Derrida on the 'law of genre'.

In his attempt to define the horror genre, Noël Carroll places an emphasis on unresolved tensions in some of his categories. For instance, in what he calls 'The Discovery Plot', one of his categories of horror-film plot , he emphasises the "tension caused by the delay between discovery and confirmation, […] the play between knowing and not knowing, between acknowledgement and nonacknowledgment" (Carroll 1981: 23). The article from which this quotation is drawn is on 'fantastic beings' and the unresolved tensions between two categories (knowing/not knowing) seems drawn from an aspect of Todorov's theorisation of the fantastic (although it is not cited). For Todorov, the fantastic is situated in the tension between two possible categories: the 'uncanny' (where a strange event is explained by a dream, drugs or trickery) and the 'marvellous' (where a strange event is explained by supernatural powers). We experience the fantastic in the moments of indecision and uncertainty when we know that we will be in the realm of either the uncanny or the marvellous, but when it is not yet clear which: "the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for the neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous" (Todorov 1975:

25). We are on a boundary between two categories, the text exhibits characteristics of both, until an explanation for the strange event is given. He even provides a diagram of this, replete with boundary lines, to demonstrate what he means:

"Uncanny | Fantastic-Uncanny | Fantastic-Marvellous | Marvellous" (Todorov 1975: 44)

The fantastic-uncanny and fantastic-marvellous are retroactive categorisations which the viewer can only undertake after the explanation for the strange event has been offered; the line between these two temporary categories therefore represents the 'pure' fantastic.

A 'pure' fantastic text would never resolve this tension between two likely categories; much like in extremity, we have no resolution between the *extremus* and *exter* elements of a film. Within Todorov's example, the fantastic can be understood as operating at and beyond the limits of the marvellous *and* at and beyond the limits of the uncanny. It is neither and both, partaking of both and yet also distinguishing itself from both (see figure 2), just as *9 Songs* relates to pornography and mainstream depictions of sex. In this way, theories of extremity may have something to contribute to theorisations of genre. The fantastic in Todorov's theory does not dissolve the distinction between the uncanny and the marvellous but cannot be

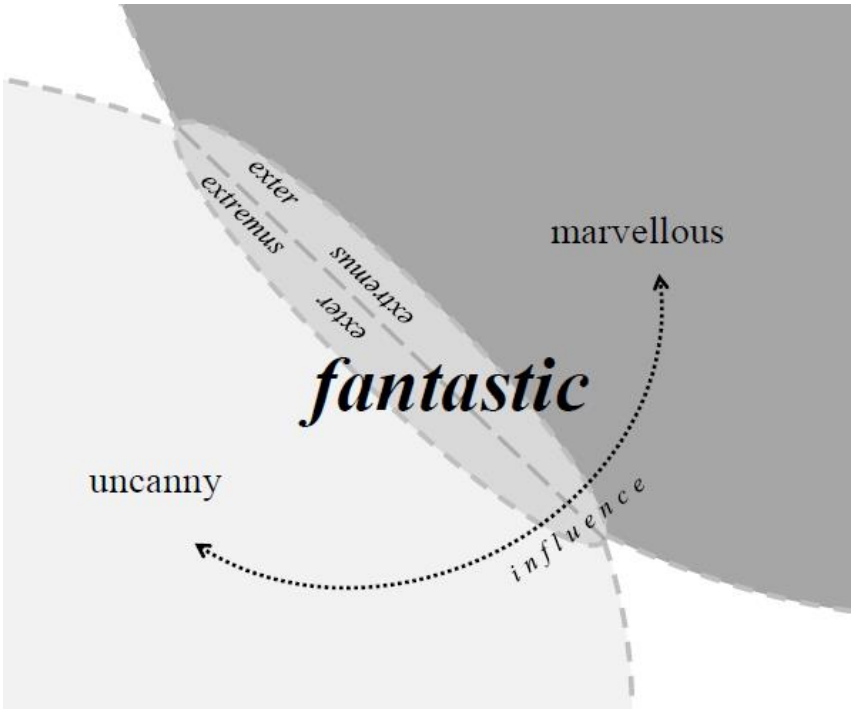


Figure 2: Diagram of extremity, the fantastic

understood without either, although neither category takes a dominant role. Importantly as Christine Brooke-Rose points out, Todorov emphasises that it is the reader's hesitation, not the character's, which is central to the fantastic (1976: 150ff): similarly within genre designations, it is the reaction of individual film viewers that is important, it is their experience of being unable to categorise a film as pornography/art, progressive/retrogressive, exploitation/art film, high-brow/low-brow that contributes to the film's extreme nature. Given that the fantastic is not perched solely on the thin line between the uncanny and the marvellous, as though separate from the two categories, but rather has characteristics common to both adjoining categories, *extremus* and *exter* provide a better way of understanding the relationship of the genre of the fantastic to adjoining genres.

Turning to Derrida's account of genre, he employs many key tenets of extremity: limits, thresholds and unresolved tensions. He emphasises that genre is intrinsically about limits, norms and censorship, concepts which are important within the concept of extremity: "as soon as the word 'genre' is sounded […] a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind" (1980: 56). However we may conceive of the links between participants in a genre, the impetus behind our creation of genre is categorisation, and even if these boundaries are blurred or unclear, the idea of a boundary is wedded into the fabric of genre. In theorising genre, Derrida focuses heavily on the limits of genre itself: what constitutes the 'law of genre' is the "authoritarian summons to a law of 'do' or 'do not'," and "the whole enigma of genre springs perhaps most closely from within this limit" (ibid.). The emphasis within my conception of extremity on a nuanced analysis of the limits of a genre rather than focussing on the prototype or norm therefore reflects some of Derrida's concerns about genre.

Further links to extremity arise in Derrida's use of terms which suggest unresolved tensions when considering the name of a genre, and some of the most interesting links to extremity can

be found in his thoughts about the position and meaning of a genre's name. Referring to a French publishing custom of naming the form of a book (novel, account, short story, autobiography) below the title on the front cover (e.g. Amélie Nothomb. *Loving Sabotage*. Novel.), Derrida suggests that this appellation is a "titleless title, the mentionless mention of its genre" (ibid.: 63). The constituent elements of these terms do not negate each other but rather remain in unresolved contradiction because the appellation is in a liminal position in relation to the contents of the book. Although it features ostensibly within the title of the book, it is not the title; although it purports to stand outside the book, describing it from without, its presence on and in the book means that it is part of and inside the book. It is worth quoting Derrida at length here to highlight the confluences in his and my terminology:

> "This designation is not novelistic; it does not, in whole or in part, take part in the corpus whose denomination it nonetheless imparts. Nor is it simply extraneous to the corpus. But this singular topos places within and without the work, along its boundary, an inclusion and exclusion with regard to genre in general, as to an identifiable class in general. It gathers together the corpus and, at the same time, in the same blinking of an eye, keeps it from closing, from identifying itself with itself. This axiom of non-closure or non-fulfilment enfolds within itself the condition for the possibility and the impossibility of taxonomy. This inclusion and this exclusion do not remain exterior to one another; they do not exclude each other. But neither are they immanent or identical to each other. They are neither one nor two." (Derrida 1980: 65)

The genre designation is therefore inside and outside ('within and without the work'), but it is also neither inside nor outside ('does not […] take part in' … 'not simply extraneous'). Just as the *extremus* and *exter* involve inside and outside, it signals inclusion and exclusion, while not approaching the norm or the maximal. Here the limit is both broken and reinforced by the genre designation ('gathers together' … 'keeps it from closing') just as *exter* breaches a boundary

whilst emphasising its existence. At the same time, the two sides of the boundary are neither firmly assimilated nor firmly separated ('do not remain exterior' … 'do not exclude' … 'neither are they immanent or identical' … 'neither one nor two'). As I suggested in relation to *9 Songs*, new extreme films do not transcend, negate or destroy the boundary between mainstream film and pornography, but nor do they render it any clearer or less blurred. *9 Songs* partakes of both sides whilst being excluded by both; it becomes a limit case of both genres and therefore is both inside and outside both. Nonetheless a new genre between these two is not created because the new extreme film is so heavily indebted to both genres that it cannot be separated from either, much like the designation of 'novel' cannot be separated from the novel itself. The characteristics which Derrida identifies as pertinent to the law of genre, through the example of a genre's name, therefore echo how I have described genre in new extreme films, suggesting that *extremus* and *exter* are useful for thinking about genre more broadly, not only the genre of new extreme films.

The example that Derrida uses to explain this, is Maurice Blanchot's *La Folie du jour* (1973), which is described as an "account of an accountless account […] consisting of a framing edge without content, without modal or generic boundaries" (ibid.: 73). The negated negation of account in the first phrase (account – account + account) speaks to the unresolved nature of the tensions within genre: not only is firm genre negated but even this negation is uncertain. This seems to account for the fact that genre cannot be pinned down, whilst being not only self-evident and meaningful when used vernacularly, but staunchly defended by critics, scholars and viewers. This is reiterated in the phrase 'framing edge without … boundaries': we cannot deny that a boundary exists and that it is important but at the same time, it does not exist; it frames a category but is not a boundary; we can understand the designations but it cannot enclose the participants of that category; it is a limit but it does not limit. This also allows for the

growth and evolution of genres; in new extreme films, the 'framing edges' to transgress change over time but we still comprehend earlier and later films within a single category. For Derrida, our inability to pinpoint the nature of genre is not a failure, but rather, unresolved tensions are inherent to the concept of genre. As such, closely examining these unresolved tensions, through the lens of *extremus* and *exter* is a useful way of advancing our understanding of the interactions of genres. The concept of extremity demonstrates how we can understand a space where two genres have influence but remain separate, where something participates in both genres but is also denied entry into both. It is this space that for Derrida is intrinsic to the law of genre.

Humanism, failure, ethical witnessing

As well as the generic ramifications of extremity, we must consider the logical consequences of new extreme films' ethical framework: is it enough to make people see alternative interpretations of an image, or of the events the image depicts, if no concrete action follows? What does it mean ethically if no concrete action takes place as a result? If our assumption is that a transgressive work of art has failed, should it be unable to change in concrete ways the world around us, must we therefore reconsider what we mean by transgressive filmmaking? Analysing *Twentynine Palms* and Quandt's response to it, Lübecker argues that the film is 'doubly transgressive' by challenging social and aesthetic norms, but failing to tie such provocations to a specific emancipatory agenda (2015: 124). It transgresses the expectations of transgressive art. As I have shown, this is also the case for many films discussed here because their political agendas are unclear or contradictory. What does this say about new extreme films and transgressive filmmaking?

Lübecker's and Grønstad's ideas about the potential of certain films to expand concepts such as humanism, the visible world and art are helpful here. Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre and Nicolas Bourriaud, Lübecker broadly defines a humanist interpretation of literature and art as focussing on their power as "a motor for the development of humanist and democratic ways of being together, […] [of] art as a model [for social relations]" (2015: 10) before pointing out that the films in his corpus "all communicate in a very different way" (ibid.). Rather than suggesting that his chosen films do not belong to a humanist tradition of democracy, enlightenment, *Bildung* and understanding, Lübecker argues that they call for a rethinking of 'humanism'. Lübecker therefore coins the term 'humanism XL' which "takes into account the fact that we cannot fully know ourselves, that the human psyche is a much richer (and also more problematic) field than we may sometimes be inclined to believe when we read about art as an exercise in democracy, empathy, and so on" (ibid.: 170). This is also a good way of thinking about the expanded possibilities of interpretation that new extreme films propose, because new extreme films expand the restricted possibilities of hegemonic interpretations; yet in their retrogressive political stances and provocative, confrontational engagement with the spectator, new extreme films do not obviously reflect the 'pact of generosity' or 'democratic concern' which Sartre and Bourriaud respectively see in art and literature (ibid.: 8-10). Expanding the definition of humanism allows the provocative, confrontational films discussed here to be humanist.

New extreme films are certainly problematic but they also place an interrogation of ourselves, our psyche, the societies in which we live and the power structures that govern these, at the heart of the experience of watching them. These power structures are related to patriarchal controls (*Baise-moi*, *Romance*, *Anatomy of Hell*, *Fat Girl*), colonialism (*Trouble Every Day*),

capitalism (*In My Skin*), heteronormative family units (*Antichrist*) or ethnic and socio-economic categories (*Battle in Heaven*), while the spectator's role in defining seduction (*Fat Girl*), witnessing rape (*The Brown Bunny*, *Irreversible*, *Free Will*, *Twentynine Palms*), watching pornography (*A Hole in my Heart*, *A Serbian Film*) and constructing national identities (*A Serbian Film*, *Taxidermia*, *A New Life*) is highlighted. Humanism XL is a form of humanism that does not implicitly demand a single absolute form of human or humanity, but rather revels in the heterogeneity and "complexity of the human psyche," attempting to grapple with, rather than rejecting the problems that such complexity implies, but also seeing those problems as "a field rich in potential" (ibid.). Understanding new extreme films as engaging in such a form of humanism allows us to critique their retrogressive tendencies whilst considering that they have something productive to offer the world.

What such a conception of humanism also hints at is the importance of failure in a productive progressive form of ethics. Following Hannah Arendt's "writings on human rights as a 'flawed' but necessary concept" and Sharon Sliwinski's idea of an 'ethics of failure', Kozol suggests that "visual encounters that stage a confrontation with moral failure can themselves foster an ethics of recognition of the humanness of others while contending with the spectator's own gaze" (2014: 18–19). Thus we can argue that the failure of new extreme films to present a progressive agenda is itself part of the films' educational effect. Moreover, in films discussed here such as *The Brown Bunny*, *Antichrist*, *Free Will* and *A Hole in my Heart*, moral failures are thematised within the diegesis. They partially attain their productive effect *because of* rather than *despite* their ethical flaws and this is demonstrated in the fact that they prompted so much public, critical and scholarly discussion when released, even if it was negative. Indeed if discussion and thought, interrogation and reconceptualization are the central elements of a new extreme ethical framework, such controversy fits with such a framework. Nonetheless, this

comes close to condoning bigotry for inciting discussion, which raises the problematic question of when bigotry is praised because it is actually a complex form of progressive politics, and when it should be challenged as simple bigotry. A similar criticism can be levelled at Lübecker's idea of 'humanism XL': how far can humanism be stretched before it becomes anti-humanist or nihilistic, and how do we judge the point at which a film should be categorised as having moved from one to the other? However, as my discussion of genre emphasised, it is unhelpful to see a film as being either bigoted or not, either humanist or not. What is important is that these films participate significantly in the genre of humanism or humanism XL, even as retrogressive elements belie the emphasis on education, enlightenment and productive discussion at the heart of humanism.

Moreover, regardless of the humanist qualities of individual films, the concept of ethical witnessing, something encouraged by the films but decided upon by the film viewer, is compatible with humanism. Kozol frames ethical witnessing in relation to images of war as "a transitive process between images and viewers that pivots ambivalently around the politics of spectacle as much as around critical framings of war and human suffering" (2014: 13). In conceiving of a process between spectacle and critical framings of suffering, Kozol foreshadows my argument about how new extreme films engage with the spectator. I argued that the communication of the visible, proximate and durative qualities of sex and violence through visible, close-up or extended spectacles, encourages the spectator to engage with broader discourses around sex and violence. Kozol argues that the societal impact of such forms of witnessing does not come from specific actions taken by the spectator within that society that can be linked to the spectator having watched a particular film. Rather the changes to the person's understanding of themselves and their awareness of their complicity within the structures of power, that are made visible in watching a film, are the films' productive ethical effect:

> I define ethics here as the actions and conduct of the self toward the other that recognize such acts as relational and intersubjective. "Slow and arduous transformation" derives as much from reckoning with one's own complicity in structures of oppression as it does in any intentional act to ameliorate those conditions. (Kozol 2014: 15)

In this case, the spectator's reflections on (or 'reckoning with') power structures, alternative perspectives, and the complicity of viewers in images in new extreme films form the necessary ethical consequences. The transgressions we see in new extreme films might be unable to create any wholesale change in a society, but they can be part of pushing it in a particular, potentially progressive direction; they can form part of the 'reckoning with' that has the potential to inform action. A detailed examination of the pressure that new extreme films place on ideas such as humanism and progressive politics must wait for a later study, but it is clear that my discussion of visibility, proximity and duration can throw much light onto previous work done on the impact of these provocative films.

Concluding remarks

New extreme films are provocative and confrontational on many levels: physically, emotionally, intellectually, ethically, politically. These provocations arise in the form of *extremus* and *exter*, as many small transgressions and near-transgressions of conventions, expectations and limits that govern the films: pertaining to genre, aesthetics, visibility, pleasure and subject matter amongst others. These small transgressions and near-transgressions are, in new extreme films, layered atop each other in visible, proximate, long sequences. Such sequences challenge the spectator watching them to consider why they watch, to reconsider interpretations conventionally attached to images of sex and violence, and to wonder about their own role in the

events and images presented by the film. This transformative ethical potential is often ambiguous and opaque in its political specificity, and sometimes retrogressive, which poses problems for a straightforward analysis of new extreme films as artworks employing transgressive techniques to progressive political ends. This resistance to established ideas of progressivism, educational value and humanism, despite a demand that the spectator undertake an ethical rethinking of conventional images, interpretations and power structures, puts pressure on conventional understandings of transgression, humanism and progressivism. New extreme films are incredibly disruptive for the spectator, for scholars and even for critical terminology.

Defining extremity as I have, is of significance for new extreme films because it provides a theoretical basis for understanding how new extreme films transgress, disrupt, disturb, provoke and confront. It enables us to grasp what is particular about this form of transgression and what distinguishes these transgressions from those of other sexual or violent but less disruptive films. It is also pertinent because it provides a basis for understanding why these films have become attached to the moniker 'extreme'.

This thesis expands our understanding of 'extreme cinema' most simply by asking 'what is extreme about new extreme films?'. It proposes an analysis of a sub-group within 'extreme cinema', detailing an understanding of extremity that is useful for thinking about how other films transgress, how they engage with boundaries, and how they participate in genre. Frey (2016) analyses the discourses that surround extreme films, their marketing, advertising and critical reception but few other studies seek to understand the constellation of ideas around the word 'extreme'. Even without stepping beyond the realms of media studies into discussions of religious 'extremism', political 'extremism', 'extreme' climates or 'extreme' sports, we can

see divergent and unchallenged usages of the word 'extreme'. The UK government has a definition of 'extreme pornography' but this differs greatly from Jones's corpus of 'extreme pornography' (2013: ch. 9); del Río's (2016) corpus of 'extreme' films has no overlaps whatsoever with Horeck and Kendall's (2011) 'new extremism', while Alexandra West's (2016) 'new French extremity' corpus includes numerous films not considered by del Río and explicitly excluded by Horeck and Kendall. Further work must also take into account differences and changes within these sub-categories, noting the different political exigencies that steer understandings of the term 'extremity'. Even if they can still be understood as 'new extreme', later new extreme films such as *Love* and *Nymphomaniac* demonstrate the influence of neoliberal economic pressures as more numerous sexual and violent scenes, as well as greater CGI effects, seem necessary for their transgressions, and extremity is commercialised in ways unheard of with earlier new extreme films. Just as Helen Hester's *Beyond Explicit* (2014) sought to analyse the usage of 'pornography' beyond sexually explicit material, this thesis provides a means for understanding what is extreme about films designated as 'extreme', and a launch-pad for considering a wider range of films.

My consideration of genre boundaries also points to the importance of analysing 'extreme' films from the perspectives of different viewers: the circulation of ideas which contribute to the discourse about extremity is not limited to the academy and so considering extreme films not solely from an arthouse or even mainstream centre of gravity is integral to comprehending what is understood as extreme about extreme films. An analysis from different perspectives also requires a consideration of the growth and development of the genre. This demands both that we go back to 'old' extreme films in order to consider the relevance of extremity to their historical and contemporary reception, and that we consider the changing nature of extremity over time, even within the evolving genre of new extreme films. Extremity, understood as the

unresolved tensions between *extremus* and *exter* will be useful in broaching each of these subjects.

Selected filmography

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Baise-moi. 2000. Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh-Thi.

Battle in Heaven [Batalla en el cielo]. 2005. Carlos Reygadas.

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Fat Girl [A ma soeur!]. 2001. Catherine Breillat.

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In My Skin [Dans ma peau]. 2002. Marina de Van.

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Irreversible [Irréversible]. 2002. Gaspar Noé.

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Sombre. 1999. Philippe Grandrieux.

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